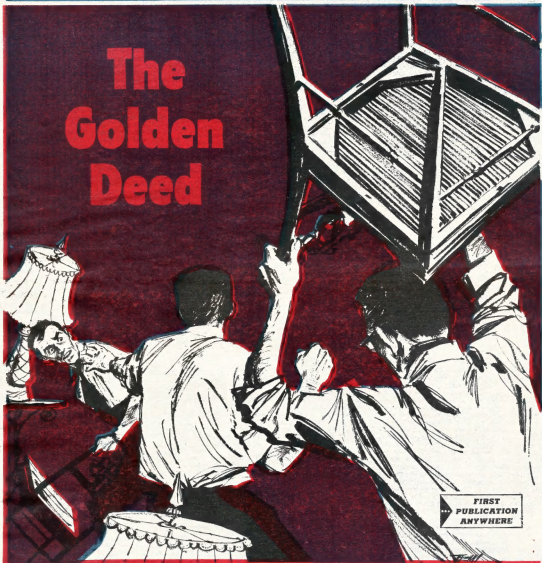


STAR WEEKLY

SEPTEMBER 5, 1959

# COMPLETE NOVEL

## The Golden Deed



FIRST  
PUBLICATION  
ANYWHERE

The surprise ending of this latest thriller by **ANDREW GARVE** climaxes a story of suspense, as the life of a family is disrupted by a stranger

# Golden Deeds

Illustration by Tom McNeely

THEY might have been any small family party as they made for the Somerset coast that August afternoon. In fact they were the Mellanbys, Sally Mellanby was driving the car. She was slim and attractive, with large brown eyes and an expressive face. The jade-green sun dress she wore set off her brown skin to perfection. Her dark hair swung loose on her shoulders. She looked about 25, but in fact she was 32. Behind her in the car sat six-year-old Alison, curly-haired, observant, and immensely self-possessed. In the back were eight-year-old Tony, a solid, freckled boy in T-shirt and swimming trunks, who sat clutching a partially inflated air bed that he intended to use as a raft—and Kira, Kira was the Norwegian girl who had come to Sally as nurse-help for the summer holidays. She was 18, blonde, charming, and very placid, and she fitted perfectly into the lively Mellanby household.

The moment Sally stopped the car, Alison was off with her bucket and spade, racing along the familiar dune path to "their place"—a sheltered, grass-covered hollow above the beach. Tony blew him air into his air bed before following her. It was a very old air bed and leaked from the nozzle, but it made a jolly good raft all the same, according to him. Sally and Kira unlaided rug, towels and tea basket from the boot and toiled after the children. At the top of the bank they almost collided with Alison, who was racing back full of indignation. "Mummy," she gasped, "there's a man in our place—a man!"

Sally looked along the sandbank. Above the beach a pair of swimming trunks had been spread out to dry and an expense of brown male chest was just visible through the marram grass. "Well, never mind," she said equally, "there are plenty of other places." Even in August, this stretch of beach was usually quiet. The girls got over there. She pointed, and led the way to another little nook. Kira spread the rug and they all changed into their swim suits. Sally said she intended to sun-bathe before going into the water, so Kira took the children down to the sea.

"Keep close to the edge, Tony," Sally called after them. She watched them down to the water, and for a little while afterwards. Kira and Alison stayed in the tiny breaking waves, splashing and laughing. Tony began to paddle his raft slowly up and down with his hands, parallel to the shore. A little way out the sea was rippled by the gentle offshore breeze, but when Tony was it was as smooth and safe as a pond.

With a sigh of contentment Sally stretched out full length on the rug, turning her face up to the sun and moving her shoulders until the sand was comfortable packed down beneath them. It was a blissfully hot day, the first for more than a week. Relaxed in the sun's warmth she thought how lucky she was to be able to take full advantage of it. Really, she had almost too many blessings to count. A devoted husband whom she loved and admired, two delightful children, a beautiful home, no money worries. Leisure enough to make the bringing up of a family wholly enjoyable; leisure to share John's but not deep enthusiasm. Soon, in fact, she might have too much leisure. Perhaps the time had come to think about another baby. They had decided that two were all they could afford to educate, but that was before John had come into his inheritance.

She sat up as a sudden hoot came from the water's edge. Alison was in trouble, and as usual wasn't slow to advertise the fact. Kira was wading, examining the little girl for a moment. Presently she picked her up and started to carry her in up the beach. Sally went to meet them.

"A small piece of glass, I think," Kira said, in her careful English.

Sally inspected Alison's toe. "We'll wrap it up—you'll look as if you've got it."

It was only after several minutes that she noticed Tony. Taking advantage of the diversion, he

had paddled his raft into deep water and was yards from the shore. Sally jumped up and began to run down the beach. "Come back, Tony," she called, "you're much too far out. That's very naughty!" Tony grinned and started to paddle the unswervingly craft boat. It turned in a circle, but came no nearer. It was almost on the edge of the rippled water, and as the offshore wind caught it the gap grew wider. In real alarm now, Sally splashed in and began to swim after it. She wasn't much of a swimmer, but she was better than Kira. Anxiety, as well as exertion, took her breath away. She could hear someone calling out on the beach—Kira. She swam on, with desperate, ineffective strokes. The little waves splashed in her face. Suddenly she gulped a mouthful of water and spluttered and went under. She came up gasping and phlegm-stricken, brushing her arms wildly to try to keep her head out. She had to reach the raft—but it was still yards ahead. . . . Another wave sloped over her and she breathed water and choked helplessly. Fear gripped her. She was going under again. . . . It was incredible, but she was going to drown.

At that moment a strong hand seized her, holding her up while she got her breath back. A man's voice, reassuringly calm, said, "Don't struggle—I'll soon get you in."

"Tony!" she gasped.

"He's all right," the man said. "I'll come back for him in a minute. . . . Just relax."

She felt his hands close on the sides of her, she felt herself being dragged backwards through the water as he kicked out. She lay still, with her legs together and her hands by her side, trying to make it easier for him, trying not to think. It seemed a terribly long way back. The man was gasping now when he finally drew her into the shallows. She turned and gazed fearfully out to the sea. The raft was still there but it was visibly sagging. "I'll sink," she cried in an agonized voice. "It is sinking. . . . Tony. . . ."

"I'll get him," the man said again. "Don't worry." In a moment he was back in the sea, striking out with a powerful fast crawl. Sally knelt in the surf, staring after him, her face rigid with fear. Kira had joined her. They didn't speak, but kept their eyes fixed on the distant moving head. Suddenly Sally drew in her breath sharply and clutched Kira's arm as the air bed heeled over. Tony had disappeared! Then she saw that the man was there. He'd reached Tony. She could see them both now. They were coming back—but so slowly, so so slowly. The man must be exhausted. . . . But now there were other people gathered from nowhere—two young men among them who went plunging in to help just as it seemed that the bobbing figures would never make the shore. In a few seconds Tony was brought in, scared but unharmed, and Sally was scooping him with the vehemence of enormous relief and turning to the rescuer, the brown-chested man from "their place," who was almost spent but who managed a fleeting cry all the same as he fought to get his breath back.

## CHAPTER II

THERE was a period of confusion after that as people pressed around, congratulating the rescuers and offering help. Fifteen minutes later a casual passer-by would scarcely have known that anything unusual had occurred. The here-in-chief had struggled back into his wet flannels and was drinking a cup of sweet tea from the vacuum flask.

"I simply don't know how I can ever begin to thank you," Sally said to the rescuer. She had said something like it several times before, but those seemed so inadequate and her relief and gratitude

were so boundless that she had to go on saying it. "Really, it was nothing," the man said. "I'm glad I happened to be around, that's all."

You must be absolutely worn out. He grinned, showing strong white teeth. "I take a lot of soaking out," he said. It was true that he looked none the worse for his terrific exertions. He was, Sally now realized, a quite unusually large man—well over six feet, and massively built. His thick black hair was clipped short, his rather heavy jaw was dark-shadowed, and he had very vivid blue eyes. The total physical effect was one of tremendous virility. He looked about 40.

I honestly thought those last few yards were going to be too much for you," she said. "Well, I rather wondered myself, to tell you the truth. There was a bit of a current. . . ." His manner was easy, his accent polished. "Still, it's well that ends well." He put his cup down on the grass and got to his feet. "Thanks for the tea, it was just what I needed. . . . Now I guess I'll be pushing along."

"Do please let me your name," Sally said. "It's Roscoe. Frank Roscoe."

"And I'm Sally Mellanby. . . . The awful boy over there is Tony, as you know—the little girl is my daughter, Alison—and that's Kira, from Norway."

Roscoe smiled again, his glance resting appreciatively on Kira for a moment. "Always wanted to go to Norway," he said gallantly.

"Are you on holiday here?" Sally asked. "No, I'm on business, of a sort—hoping to find a small farm I can buy, as a matter of fact. . . . I should have started long this morning, but the weather was so good I decided to take time off and have a day on the beach."

"What goodness you did. . . ." Sally was watching some concern as Roscoe struggled to get his shirt into his sodden trousers. "You're going to be terribly uncomfortable in those wet things. . . . Have you far to go?" "Not really—just a few miles."

"You've got a car, have you?" "No—I came by bus and walked along the beach."

"Then we must take you home. You can't possibly go on a bus like that."

"Oh, I shall soon dry—I don't want to break up your picnic."

"Heavens, we're not in the mood for picnics now—at least, I'm not. . . . Where are you staying?"

"I don't suppose you'd know it—it's a little place called Freney Stoke, near Buth. I'm at a pub there."

"But we live in Buth," Sally told him. "We know it very well. . . . We'll drop you off on the way—it couldn't be easier."

"It's the very best kind of you. . . ."

"It's the very best kind of you. . . . Come on, children, get ready."

In a few minutes everyone was dressed and all the belongings were gathered up. Roscoe rejoined the party and they all set off over the bank. Alison's toe, forgotten during tea, had begun to hurt again, she declared, and Roscoe carried her, lifting her on his hip as though she were a feather. Tony marched behind him, glancing up at him every few seconds in unconcealed admiration. When they reached the car Kira took the children in the back and Roscoe got in beside Sally.

"What sort of farm are you looking for, Mr. Roscoe?" she asked, as they left the sandy track and turned into the high road.

"Oh—something quite small—a few acres for a poultry farm, actually. . . . I'm one of those redundant army chaps—too old at 40! Now I've got to find some way of turning my gratuity into a living."

It took them little more than half an hour to reach Freney Stoke by the side roads that Sally knew well. As they ran into the attractive stone village, she said: "Welcome to your pub, Mr. Roscoe."

The Plough—just on the left, there. Very modest, but I'm having to watch the old shanks at the moment. . . . Fine—that'll do nicely. . . ."

Sally brought the car to a stop, and turned to him. "I know my husband will be most anxious to meet you," she said. "If you're not doing anything, would you come to dine with us tomorrow evening? I'm certain my husband would never forgive me if he didn't have the chance to say 'Thank you' himself. . . . Won't you give us the pleasure of your company?"

"Well, if you put it like that I'll be very happy to come, of course. . . . Where exactly do you live?"

"Don't worry about that," Sally said, "I'll come and fetch you. . . . How would you like to pick up here at 6.30—that will give us plenty of time for drinks before dinner."

"It would be fine," Roscoe said. "I'll look forward to it. . . . He got out of the car, still dripping a little, and pushed the door shut. Then he stuck his head in at the window. "I say, you won't tell anyone about this, will you? About our little adventure, I mean? I wouldn't want any of those newspapers trying to make a story out of it."

"But it is a story," Sally said. "Everyone ought to know about it."

"No, no. . . . If any newspapers do get in touch with you, Mrs. Mellaby, please don't tell them anything. I'd hate any publicity—army training, you know. Anyway, I'd feel such a fool. . . . I mean all!"

"Well—all right," Sally said reluctantly. "Though I think you're much too modest."

As he changed his clothes and spruced himself up in his small, plainly furnished bedroom, Roscoe was aware of a pleasurable excitement—the excitement of a traveller contemplating a new journey. It was too soon yet, of course, to know just how rewarding the trip would be, or indeed whether it would be worth undertaking at all—but the preliminary indications seemed hopeful. What he needed now was more information.

As soon as opening time arrived he made his way to the saloon car. The door was ajar, and he glanced inside before entering. The landlady of the Plough, short-sleeved, obese and elderly, was leaning against the counter of a newspaper. There were not any other customers yet. Roscoe went in.

"Evening," he said cheerfully.

"Evening, sir," she replied.

Roscoe said, "Well, I must say it's a lovely bit of country you've got around here."

"Very nice, isn't it?"

"Have you lived in these parts long?"

"I've been in this house 30 years."

"Really?—then you must know the district pretty well. I wonder if you know some people named Mellaby?"

"Mellaby? . . . ? Do you mean Mr. John Mellaby?"

"Could be. I met a Mrs. Mellaby today—

dark, very attractive, with a lot of gold and don't

think that right, sir, that would be the Mellabys.

Everyone round here knows them—well, of them, anyway. They're pretty big shots in Bath."

"Are they?"

"Oh, yes—they're always been written about in the papers. Public work, you know—not her so much, but he's always busy—president of this and that, helping on committees—you know the sort of thing."

"Useful chap," Roscoe said.

"Oh, they're fine people, the Mellabys, and very well liked. Do a lot of good and don't throw

their weight about too much—not like some!"

Roscoe sipped his whiskey thoughtfully. This was really beginning to sound most promising—always supposing there was enough of it to make it

whiskey while. A conscientious type, Mellaby, obviously. High-minded. Might be just the right material for Plan II. . . . Roscoe continued to

explore the grounds.

"What does he do for a living—do you know?"

"John Mellaby?—Oh, I don't think he does anything now. . . . He's interested in all those bits

and pieces the Romans left about a thousand years ago about them—but that's just a hobby. . . . Used to be a lecturer at Bristol, I seem to remember—but

he gave that up. . . . He's one of the lucky ones—doesn't need to work."

"Well off, is he?"

"Oh, he's well off, all right."

As the Mellabys' home was a two-storeyed Georgian house standing in a beautiful walled

garden on the western outskirts of Bath, John Mellaby had preferred it to the exquisite Regency

terraces in the centre of the town because it was so much quieter to work in. . . . One end was given up entirely to the children; at the other end he had his study. There were no traffic noises to speak of, and he could bury himself in his writing without fear of interruption. The fortune he had inherited had neither spoiled nor embarrassed him. He was much too active a man, as well as too self-disciplined, ever to fall into idleness, and in addition to many good causes he supported, he had aided research by financing excavations in the country.

He was still absorbed in his notes when the family came back. He hadn't expected them home till after 6 and he looked up in surprise as the car turned into the drive. The two children, he noticed, were both in the back seat with Kira. . . . After a moment he put his papers down and went over to the car. He walked with a slight limp, the result of an accident to his left leg 10 years before.

One glance at Sally's face was enough to tell him that something was badly wrong. He said, in an anxious tone, "What's happened, darling?"

"I'll tell you later," she said. Her voice was well-controlled, but Mellaby could sense the underlying strain. "There's nothing to worry about now."

"Missy and Tony were nearly drowned!"

Alison said importantly.

Mellaby took Sally a look of horror, an incredulous, questioning look, and she gave a little more. . . . He told her to be an angel and take the children on to the back lawn for a while."

"Of course," Kira said. "Come, children." She gathered them up and went off with them down the garden.

Andrew Garve, English detective writer, was born in Leicester in 1908. A graduate in economics, he has been reporter, leader writer and foreign correspondent on London newspapers and author of books on Russia, the Middle East, the character of Hitler and about the

have made his thrilling mysteries so successful. They are now published in his languages. Many have been

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"Well, I wouldn't say you were showing any signs of shock," he said, as he got into the car beside her.

"Thank you. . . . It's amazing what a good sleep will do."

"How's Tony today?"

"Still lamenting his lost air bed—but otherwise it might never have happened."

"And the foot?"

"The foot?—Oh—Alison. She's all right, too."

"What a memory you have!"

"It's a matter of training," Roscoe said, with a grin.

"How is your search going? Have you started yet?"

"Well, I've not actually looked at anything, but I've put out a few feelers—got in touch with one or two agents, you know. . . . Quite a hectic morning, as a matter of fact. Bath seems pretty crowded."

"Sally nodded, watching the road. "It's the busiest time just now—right at the holiday peak."

"What's it like in the winter?—dead, I suppose?"

"No—just quiet. We think it's very pleasant—but then we like a rather tranquil life."

"Don't you ever get bored?"

"Bored—good heavens, no. There are always the children, and my husband works at home a good deal."

"What's his line?" Roscoe inquired innocently.

"Well, he's mostly an antiquarian, but he has a lot of other interests, too—various societies and committees. . . . People are always asking him to do things."

"Good works, eh? Useful citizen! Highly respected in the community." The touch of mockery in Roscoe's tone surprised Sally.

"Well, yes, I suppose he is," she said.

"It doesn't sound too good—the holiday peak."

"It's not exciting—but it's often very interesting." She smiled across at him. "If it comes to that, I don't suppose you'll find poultry farming exactly."

Roscoe grinned back at her. "You've got a point there," he said.

As the car turned in through the wrought iron gates, Mellaby came out into the drive to greet his guest. He limped a little more marked than usual because of his nervousness. He was always rather shy at first encounters, and this particular encounter was a real ordeal. His massive obligation to Roscoe weighed heavily on his mind. He grasped the big hand of the visitor extended to him a shade longer than he would normally have done.

"I'm glad you were able to come," he said, and paused. "My wife has told me all about what happened yesterday—your very brave action. . . . It's difficult to find words to express my gratitude for what you did. I can only say, thank you from the bottom of my heart. . . . I owe you more than I can ever repay."

"Oh, there was nothing to it," Roscoe said breezily. He gave a boyish smile. "I'd really be happier if you'd forget all about it."

"I'm not likely to do that," Mellaby said, "but I understand. . . . Let's go and have a drink, shall we?"

With a friendly pressure on Roscoe's arm he conducted him to chairs set out round a little table under a copse of trees. "We thought it might be pleasant to sit out here, as it's so warm."

"What would you like? Gin and something? Sherry?"

Mellaby finished mixing the drinks and handed them round.

"Well, this is quite an occasion," he said, raising his glass. "Your very good health, Roscoe!"

"Happy days," Roscoe said.

They drank. Sally took a glass of the chateau and the men followed her example. Mellaby passed the cigarettes to Roscoe, and lit his pipe. He was beginning to look more at ease.

"The Army," said, "my wife tells me you've just left the Army."

"Yes—I was a Major in the Gloucesters when they were hatted me."

"And now you're planning to become a chicken farmer?"

"That's the general idea. I may be crazy—but I've always been used to an open-air life and I know I'd never be able to stand a desk job. Ordinary farming is more than I could take, but I think I could manage poultry—and some people seem to make a living at it."

"I expect you've been pretty thoroughly into the economics of it," Mellaby said.

"Oh, yes, I think I know the form. I've been

browsing in the books quite a lot — you can pick up a good bit there . . ." Roscoe grinned. "At least I can tell the difference between a White Leghorn and a Rhode Island Red now."

"It's more than I can!" Mellanby said. He puffed thoughtfully at his pipe for a moment. "You know, I should think it might help if you could talk to someone who's actually running a poultry farm. I can't think of anyone offhand, but I'm sure we could find someone . . ."

"That would be a great help," Roscoe agreed. "What you really need, of course," Sally said, "is a wife. Are you married?"

"No — somehow I never seemed to get around to it. But I probably will take a wife when I'm a bit more settled — must have someone to collect the mail. First I've got to find a place."

Mellanby, looking thoughtful, got up to refill the glasses. "It's certainly going to be quite an undertaking," he said, "starting from scratch the way you're doing."

Roscoe nodded. "I'll be all right if the money holds out."

Mellanby said, "Yes," and frowned. He was a fastidious man, and there was something very distasteful about offering financial help as a direct return for the saving of lives. Roscoe might easily feel the same way about it. Yet the subject had been raised — and now was surely the time to show willingness. As casually as he could, he said, "Well, if an interest-free loan would help you over the hump in the early stages, you've only to tell me."

"That's most generous of you," Roscoe said gratefully. "I'll certainly bear it in mind. But I'd like to stand on my two feet as far as possible."

"Talking of standing on your own feet," Mellanby said, with a faint smile, "how is your plan to get about while you're looking for a place? Sally tells me you haven't a car."

"No, I haven't — I managed to get myself through the driving test the other day, so I've got a license, but the car will have to wait. I can't see my way more clearly . . ." He grinned. "I guess I'll have to rely on public transport."

Mellanby shook his head. "I'd have thought a car would be absolutely essential while you're searching. You're bound to be covering a lot of ground, and you'll find public transport very thin as soon as you get off the main roads . . . Look, will you borrow my car?"

"Ah, no — it's very good of you, Mellanby, but you'll be needing it yourself."

"We've got two cars, as you can see. So I can easily share Sally's."

"I'm — well, it's darned nice of you, I must say, and very tempting . . . It would make a lot of difference — save me hours of footslogging . . . Are you sure about it, Mellanby?"

"You'll be more than welcome," Mellanby said. "Take mine with you tonight."

"Well," Roscoe said, with obvious relief, "I can really do that. It'll ease another problem for me. It looks as though the first thing I'll have to do in the morning is find new lodgings."

"Oh?"

"Yes, the Plough's booked up solid after tonight, so I've got to shift. I'll try a couple of other places in the village, but they're full, too, and they tell me Bath's chock-a-block . . . Still, I expect I'll find something . . ."

Mellanby and Sally exchanged glances. There was a little pause. Then Sally said, "Won't you come and stay with us, Mr. Roscoe? We'd be so pleased if you would, and we're lots of room."

Roscoe looked quite taken aback. "Oh, no, I couldn't do that — it would be an imposition. You people are much too kind . . . After all, I'm just a stranger . . ."

"We don't feel you're a stranger," Sally said, "and we'd be delighted to have you . . . In fact, we insist, darling, don't we?"

"We do indeed," Mellanby said. "One of us will collect you at the Plough tomorrow morning. Roscoe, and you can use this house as a base until you're fixed up. All right?"

"I'm overwhelmed," Roscoe said. "But I can't pretend it wouldn't make things a darned sight easier for me — and apart from that, I'd enjoy it so."

"Then it's settled," Sally said. She stood up as she caught sight of Mrs. Barney, the cook, at the open front door. "After dinner I'll show you to your room."

Roscoe moved in on the following morning,

with one large suitcase, a stock of poultry journals, and a few eddiments. The rest of his belongings, he explained, were being stored in London until he had a chance to return there to put them away.

Sally rang up some of her country friends to see if they knew of a successful poultry farmer in the district. She was soon put on to a young man named Tom Adams, who turned out to be very affable and told her on the phone that he'd be glad to talk to Roscoe and give him any advice he could. Roscoe, well pleased, went straight off to see him, and was away all day.

Sally was sitting with the children under the copper beech when he drove in in the evening, scattering the gravel as he jammed on the brakes before the door. Adams was wearing a coat of a huge bunch of red and white carnations. He crossed the lawn to her and presented them with a bow and a flourish. "For you, Sally," he said.

The familiar use of her name startled her. She said, "That's not the way to take care of your shekels!" a trifle reprovingly. "But they're lovely — thank you very much. Aren't they lovely, Tony?"

"Yes," Tony said, without enthusiasm. "Can I have the elastic?"

"I've got something better than elastic for you, young fellow-me-lad," Roscoe told him. "Come and see."

Sally called after him, "How did you get on with Mr. Adams?"

"Oh, fine, fine . . . I think I've just about got the practical side sewn up, now. He was already delving in the back of the car. Adams had produced a pair of small-size boxing gloves, on which Tony felt with glee. "Ever done any boxing at school, Tony?"

"No, never, and I'm a very good boxer, except that I keep my eyes shut," Tony said.

Roscoe gave a loud guffaw. "Well, that's not much use, is it? — you'll have to practice . . . I'll soon teach you. He produced a pair of boxing gloves, for himself. Then he went round to the boot and hauled out a punchball on an adjustable stand. "Got to keep fit," he called to Sally, with a grin. "I'll show you how to use it."

Tony tried to lift the stand, but the base was of solid iron and he couldn't move it. Roscoe laughed, and threw it lightly over his shoulder. "Come on," he said, "let's go."

Adams shed a tear or two after they'd gone. He didn't bring me a present," she sobbed.

"Never mind, pet," Sally said. "Come and help me arrange these flowers, and then we'll turn out all the cupboards and see what we can find for the Jumbo Sale."

Adams brightened at once. "Oh, yes," she said. "That'll keep me amused for a long time, won't it?"

A boxing lesson was in full swing on the back lawn when Mellanby emerged from his study at 6.30. Roscoe, his magnificent torso bared to the waist, was showing Tony how to punch, while Kim stood by and watched. His tremendous biceps creaked against the punchball like gunshots in the still garden. With his great rippling muscles and agile tread he made a most impressive figure.

"Are you a heavyweight?" Tony asked, as Roscoe finally allowed the punchball to come to rest.

Roscoe nodded, with a wink at Mellanby.

"Are you a champion, too?"

"I used to box for the regiment," Roscoe said, "and I generally managed to win . . . Now you have a go."

Tony began to batter the punchball. Roscoe watched him. "Good thing for young chap to be able to use their fists," he said to Mellanby.

Mellanby smiled and said nothing.

"Too many young sinners about, if you ask me."

"Would you say so . . . ? What's your definition of a sinner?"

"Any chap who can't defend himself properly . . . Pity you can't have a crack with us, Mellanby — but I guess that leg of yours would let you down."

"I dare say the leg would be all right," Mellanby said dryly, but boxing's not really my line of country."

Following his demonstration of prowess in the garden, something extraordinary seemed to have happened to Roscoe. He now appeared determined to dominate the table too, both with his physical presence and his loud talk. His way of speech, with its curious blending of BBC accent, army slang, and transatlantic idiom, suddenly began to jar. The unabashed cross-glances he kept throwing at Kim

normally so tolerant, relaxed after a while into near-silence as Roscoe continued to hold the stage.

It was Sally, when at last she was alone with Mellanby, who began to tell him about the house.

"John," she said, "do you think you're going to like Roscoe?"

"He gave a wry smile. "I'm having a good try."

"It was awful tonight, wasn't it? . . . I simply can't imagine what got into him."

"Glad," Mellanby said.

"Well, yes, but I don't think it could have been only that. He seems completely different today — almost like a different person . . . I don't understand him at all."

"Neither do I," Mellanby said, "but then we don't know him very well yet. We'll have to wait a bit."

"He's a shocking exhibitionist — all that display of muscle on the lawn . . . I was watching from the window. I think he was doing it to impress Kim."

"Well, if you're one of those very brawny chap I suppose it's natural to show off sometimes . . . And don't forget we were glad enough of his brawn a couple of days ago."

"I know . . . Sally looked distressed. "It's difficult enough talking to him as it is, without him — it seems so horribly ungrateful after what he did . . . I know I ought to like him — but actually I think I'm a bit afraid of him."

"Oh, nonsense?"

"It's true. If he can be so arrogant now what's he going to be like in a week or two? He's beginning to take possession of the house . . ."

"Really, Sally, I think you're imagining things," Mellanby said, next day. He was away at an Antiques' summer school was being held at Weston-super-Mare, and he'd been asked to preside at the opening session. Sally usually went with him on these occasions, but this time she'd decided not to.

It was nearly 10 when he got home. The house was quiet, the children were asleep. Sally was sitting alone in the garden room, with the french doors open to the night.

"Hello, darling," she said, "I'm so glad you're back . . . How did it go?"

"Oh, quite well. There were more people than last year — a lot of them young."

"You must be tired. Come and sit down."

Mellanby joined her on the settee and began to fill his pipe. "How's the garden?"

"He was quite all right at dinner . . . At the moment, he's walking round the garden with Kim."

Mellanby said, "Oh!"

"I hope he's not going to turn out to be a wall."

"Well — Kim's not likely to come to much harm in the garden, I shouldn't think."

"It's not just that — it's everything. Haven't you noticed how he looks at her?"

"Very much the way he looks at you, I'd say."

"That's what I mean."

"Well, you're both quite an eyeful!"

Sally smiled. John, do be serious for a moment — I'm really very worried. Kim's only 18 and she's rather impressive and everyone knows that a foreigner often seems very attractive . . . It would be awful if she fell for him — I think we'd just have to bundle her off to a bit of a rest."

"It isn't as though he's a young man . . . Don't you think perhaps we ought to do something about it?"

"Do you mean you'd like me to speak to him?"

"Well, I think that would be the best way . . . I could talk to Kim, but I don't want to upset her . . ."

When Roscoe went out to the car in the morning, Mellanby stroked with him. It was a distasteful task he had to perform and he was anxious to get it over.

"Have you a big program today?" he asked.

"Four places," Roscoe said. "One of them sounds quite promising."

"Good — let me see how it turns out a winner . . . By the way, I'm sure you'll understand . . . Don't let young Kim get too fond of you."

Roscoe swung round, gazing down at Mellanby with a truculence that was something new. "What's the idea?"

"She's very young, you know."

Roscoe shrugged. "A man in my position has to take his fun where he can get it."

Mellanby stared at him for a moment, speechless. Then he said, "Well, don't try to take it here, that's all."

Roscoe looked sullen. "I don't see . . ." he



begin. Then a grin spread slowly over his face. "Okay, old man—I certainly don't want to abuse your hospitality. She's not the only well-shaped pebble on the beach. No more walls in the garden—I promise."

"Thank you," Mellanby said coldly.

\* \* \*

There was more trouble over Roscoe that afternoon—this time of a sort that Sally had been half-expecting all along. Around 5 o'clock, just as she was settling down to an instalment of *Winnie the Pooh* with Alison, he rang up to say he'd got in a bit of a jam with the car.

"Nothing serious," he said, "no casualties, and no damage to speak of—but I'm stuck and I'll need some help to get clear."

"What's happened?" Sally asked.

"Cos my near-side wing jammed against a stone wall—I was trying to pass a caravan in a lane, and there wasn't room. We're both stuck... What's the best place to ring for a tow-truck?"

"Where are you?"

"Well, I'm telephoning from the main road where the lane turns off. The signpost says 'Eversleigh ½ way and—just a minute—' Crouch 4 the other. The lane goes off to the right."

"Oh, I know the place," Sally said. "It's Blackett's Lane."

"There's a bridge being rebuilt a little way along—looks as though they're widening it."

"That's right. How far along is the car?"

"Just beyond the bridge."

"Well, I'd better ring our own garage and get them to send someone. They're very reliable."

"Thanks a lot, Sally. Sorry to be such a nuisance."

"That's all right," Sally said, "it could happen to anyone... Don't worry."

She rang off and dialled the garage. The owner, a phlegmatic man named Jack Reed, said the truck was out on a job, but as soon as it came in he'd take it straight round to Bill Mellanby's Lane himself. He couldn't say exactly when it would be.

Sally called Kira and asked her to take over the reading session and then went along to the study to tell Mellanby the news. He didn't seem at all surprised.

"Perhaps I ought to run over there, John," Sally said. "Roscoe will wonder what's happened if no one turns up."

Mellanby pushed his paper aside. "I'll come with you," he said. "We may be able to lend a hand."

There was a real tangle in Blackett's Lane. The caravan, a large and opulent-looking cream trailer, was immovably wedged between one of the stone walls and the car. Mellanby and Sally had to go through a field gate and back over the wall to get round to the front of the obstruction. Roscoe was standing there in the road, smoking a cigarette. A yard or two away a man and a woman were leaning against a black car. The glum expression on all three faces suggested that there'd been a certain amount of recrimination about the incident.

"Well—hello!" Roscoe said in surprise, as he caught sight of the Mellanbys.

"The truck won't be here yet," Sally explained. "So we thought we'd better come."

Roscoe said "Oh!" He looked at Mellanby in some embarrassment. "Sorry to bring you out, old man."

"Sorry about it all!"

The caravan owner approached. He was a big, burly, graying man of 55 or so, with a floral, fleshy face and a bit of a paunch. He was wearing a plaid shirt with sleeves rolled up, and khaki drill trousers belted over his stomach. "It's your car, is it?" he said to Mellanby.

Mellanby nodded.

"Well, it's not my mind me saying so, but this young fellow's not fit to drive it. He was going a heck of a lot too fast."

"I'd have been all right if it hadn't been for the bridge," Roscoe said. "All that clutter they're left around!... What do they want to widen a bridge in a lane like this for, anyway?"

"They're going to widen the whole lane," Mellanby told him, "and bring the main road through it to bypass Eversleigh village. It's an accident black spot."

"So will this be if people try to bring caravans through it," Roscoe said.

"We wouldn't have thought of it," the caravan owner's wife said, "but someone told us there was

an old quarry along here that would make a good stopping place. We didn't realize the lane would be quite so narrow...". She was at least 20 years younger than the man, and she wore a very striking beehive, with dark eyes and a beautifully curved mouth and one of the loveliest complexions Sally had ever seen.

"I know the quarry," Sally said, with a friendly smile. "It would make a nice stopping place."

"Anyhow," Mellanby said, "there doesn't seem to be much harm done...". He walked over to the wall and took a closer look at the Humber wing.

"I suppose these three of us could shift it off...". "We tried it already," Roscoe said—adding, with a slight grin, "I doubt if you'd make that much difference, old man."

"Oh, well, the crane should be able to lift it from the other side of the wall—and when it's free we can back out."

"That's about it," Roscoe agreed. "Let's hope no one else tries to use the lane, that all. How long do you think it'll be before the truck comes?"

"I should think it might be an hour," Sally said. For a moment or two they continued to stand and gaze at the road block. Then the caravan owner said, "Well, we're not going to shift it by just looking at it. What about you folks joining my wife and me in a glass of sherry while we're waiting?"

"That's a cheerful suggestion," Sally said. "I reckon it's better than arguing about who's to blame...". Come on in and see the homestead—

that is, as we can get in... Our name's Sherston, by the way. George and Eve Sherston. He had a bluff, friendly manner that Sally found engaging.

Sally said, "Durs is Mellanby. This is Frank Roscoe—he's staying with us."

Sherston nodded. "Glad to know you all...". His accent and way of speech had a trans-Atlantic flavour, but Mellanby didn't think he was American.

"Shall I go ahead?"

"But what a marvellous caravan," Sally exclaimed, gazing around at the exquisitely appointed interior.

"It is nice, isn't it?" Eve Sherston said. "It's so roomy—why, it's more like a flat."

"Yes—we've got a sitting-room, bedroom, kitchen, bath... It's much easier to keep clean than a flat, too."

"I love the big windows," Sally said. Eve nodded. "It's almost like living out of doors, but without the discomfort... Do come and have a look round."

Sally followed her into the kitchen. It was a housewife's dream in miniature, with every variety of space-saving contrivance and gadget.

"I never realized caravans could be as exciting as this," Sally said. "How the children would love it!"

"How many children have you?" Eve asked. "Two—a boy and a girl. Eight and six."

"Aren't you lucky? You're looked very wifely. I adore children, but that's as far as I seem to get... Still, I haven't given up hope."

Sherston was drawing the cork from a bottle of sherry as they returned to the sitting-room. "So you like our little home, Mrs. Mellanby?" he said.

"It's wonderful... It must be enormous fun."

"We think so—which is just as well, as it's all we've got for the time being. We debated whether to live in hotels or buy a van, and decided the van would be more free-and-easy...". He poured five glasses of sherry and handed them round.

"Well, this is very hospitable of you," Mellanby said. He sipped the sherry, which was excellent.

"You're on holiday, are you?"

"That's right," Sherston said. "And a good long holiday it's going to be, isn't it, Eve?" His glance rested on his wife for a moment with possessed affection. "First England, then all round Europe with a bit of lock. If it takes us years, so much the better."

"Where are you from?" Roscoe asked.

"We're from Trinidad—British West Indies. I'm an oil man—at least, I was. Mining engineer."

"Are you planning to go back there eventually?" Sally asked.

"Well, we haven't really got around to deciding that, Mrs. Mellanby. The fact is, we had a big stroke of luck and we're going to enjoy ourselves for a while, Eve! I'm a very fortunate man."

"I thought myself a small Crown concession in the bush with the idea there might be oil there—and it turned out there was. Now we're sitting pretty."

Mellanby said, "How long are you thinking of staying around here?"

"Well, it depends what there is to see—our time's a little over 1,000 years ago, but a lot of ground to cover, but I've heard Sally's a pretty interesting place."

"It's unique," Mellanby said.

"Yes, that's what they tell us... What would you advise us to go for?"

"Well, you'll want to see the Roman bath, of course—there's nothing quite so marvellous in the whole country, to my mind. It's very much as it was 1,000 years ago—you can see the stone stores where the Romans used to stand at the edge of the water, and the places they used for drying and dressing. You can see their lead pipes, and the hollow tiles they used, and a dismaying black for the chariots—it's all there, a complete bit of history."

Sherston was listening as eagerly as a schoolboy. "Now isn't that interesting, Eve?" he said. "We're going to be here for some time. And what about those famous waters they talk about so much—do you think they could get this tum of mine down, eh?" He patted his comfortable waistline.

"I've said with a smile, 'Someone told George that a spa course was just the thing to tone one up in middle-age. Do you think it works?'"

"Well, I've never tried it myself," Mellanby said, "but a lot of people do, of course."

"Does he need toning up?" Roscoe asked. He was looking at Eve Sherston—looking in such a blatantly intimate way that his meaning couldn't be mistaken. Combined with the remark, the glance was almost an indecent assault.

There was an awkward silence. Sherston was gazing at Roscoe in amazement. Eve looked most uncomfortable.

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## CHAPTER III

SALLY and Mellanby had two more days to study Roscoe's peculiar personality before the next major incident occurred. During that time, his behavior was so unpleasant that they could not longer have any doubts about their feeling towards him.

Only Mellanby's profound sense of obligation prevented him from asking his guest to leave at once. He discussed it all with Sally in a long, anxious session and they agreed that if things got no better the moment was bound to come—and

probably very soon. But Mellanby was deeply reluctant to take the step before he had to.

Then, five days after Roscoe's arrival at the house, there was a most unexpected incident. It happened before dinner, when Sally and Mellanby were in the garden. The telephone rang, and Kira answered it in the sitting room. The call was for someone, who had just returned from a long trip in the country. He came quickly downstairs to take it. Mellanby hoped it might have something to do with clinching a property deal, but evidently it hadn't. The caller, whoever he was, was extremely harsh, cracking snatches of words audible through the open window. Roscoe, holding the receiver away from his ear, glanced a little sheepishly across the lawn.

Snatches of one-sided conversation followed, on a rising pitch of temper never before heard in the Mellanby house. "I don't see you're anything to make a fuss of, old chap . . . Don't be so silly, it was only a friendly gesture . . . And more aggressively, 'you'd better watch your step, too, or you'll get hurt' — I'm not used to being threatened . . ." Presently, with another glance across the lawn, Roscoe reached out and closed the window and the Mellanby's heard no more.

\* \* \*

On the following afternoon Sally took Tony and Alison over to Blackett's Lane to have tea at the caravan. Eve Sherston had rung up, as she'd promised the day after their meeting, to make the arrangement, and Sally had accepted with alacrity. The children had been told about the caravan and were both eagerly looking forward to the outing.

They reached the quarry about 3:10. Sally's recollections of the place were a little vague, but it turned out to be quite as pleasant as she remembered it.

Eve was sitting in a deck chair by the caravan reading a book when they arrived. At the sound of the car she waved and came smiling to meet them, greeting the children with a friendly "Hello!" There was no sign of George Sherston, and Eve explained that he'd gone into Bath for the afternoon. It would give Sally and herself a better chance to talk, she said, with an oddly conspiratorial air.

Once again, as Sally looked at her, she was struck by Eve's outstandingly attractive appearance. The children took to her at once, and were fascinated when she showed them how all the bits and pieces of the caravan worked.

Afterwards Eve got them to gather sticks, and lit a fire outside the caravan to boil the kettle on — just to make it seem like real camping, she said. She'd prepared a superb tea for them inside and, altogether, was proving herself a model children's hostess.

Both Alison and Tony were looking a little somnolent by the time the last of the cakes had disappeared. Eve, casting about for something new to occupy them, said, "Do you collect conkers, Tony?"

"You bet!" Tony said, livening up at once. "I've got 498er at home, he confided. "It's a last-yearer. It's the school conker. We have form conkers, too."

"Well, there are no end of them under that tree over there — but I don't know whether they're ripe."

"Oh, I'll soon tell. Come on, Alison, let's go and see. Can we, Mummy?"

"Of course," Sally said. "You can do what you like as long as you keep away from the cliff." She watched them race off. For the first time, she and Eve were alone together.

"Well," Eve said with a smile, "now that the little pichers are out of the way, I can give you the message I've got for you. George says he's awfully sorry about last night — he realizes he was terribly rude and he hopes you'll forgive him."

Sally looked at her blankly. "What on earth are you talking about, Eve?"

"Why, his ringing up, of course. Obviously he ought to have spoken to one of you first — it was unforgivable. However angry he was he ought to have done that."

Sally stared. "You mean it was he who rang up Roscoe?"

"Why, yes. Didn't you know?"

"No—Roscoe didn't tell us who it was."

She broke off. "What was it all about?"

"Well, it was quite stupid actually. Believe it or not, Roscoe suddenly turned up here yesterday

morning. I was never so surprised in my life. He said he just happened to be passing, but frankly I think he'd been hanging around for some time time. Anyway, it was an odd coincidence that George was away in town. I wouldn't have mentioned it to George at all — he's terribly jealous and I knew he'd be furious about it — but Roscoe was smoking a cigarette and he came into the caravan with it, and as George and I don't smoke I knew he'd realize someone had been there. So I had to tell him, and he was mad, as I knew he would be — he rushed straight off to the phone box, and warned Roscoe to keep away."

"Good heavens, Eve, I'm not surprised. And I don't blame him in the least. Eve, I am sorry."

"Well, it wasn't your fault, was it? Anyway, it was a good idea about very little — nothing really happened, except that Roscoe got a bit fresh and I had to tell him to behave himself. I must say he's got the most colossal nerve! I didn't tell George he'd got fresh of course, or he wouldn't have been content just to telephone. What's the matter with the man—hasn't he got a girl of his own?"

"Apparently not," Sally said, "though he obviously ought to have — he's a positive menace. It isn't the first time this sort of thing has happened, you know. John and I got very worried about him and Kira a few days ago—she's our nice Norwegian girl — and John had to speak to him about it. Now it looks as though he's switched sides. He told us he was thinking of taking a wife — but I'm afraid he's just a wolf."

Eve smiled. "Well, he'd better not try to take George's wife unless he's looking for trouble. George is a kind of old thing at heart, but he'd beat the brains out of anyone he caught making a pass at it. He was brought up rough and tough, and I'm afraid he's not very civilized. What's the matter with 'em?"

"It's Roscoe who isn't civilized," Sally said bitterly.

Eve gave her a puzzled look. "I agree, I think he's a terrible man — but as he's a guest in your house, and a friend of my husband's, I shall be civil. It's his fault, it's his fault." She broke off.

"Well, it's a bit difficult."

"He's not a friend," Sally said. "He's much more than that — and much less . . ." In a few words, she told Eve about the rescue incident, and all that had followed it.

Eve listened, fascinated. "Well," she said, "that really is a story. Now things are beginning to make sense. You know, George and I simply couldn't make out how Roscoe fitted into the picture—we were absolutely baffled. You and your husband seemed so charming and gentle, and Roscoe — the way he behaved! You should have heard George on the subject that first night."

"We can't make him out at all," Sally said. "Sometimes he seems quite normal — and other times he behaves like a particularly nasty delinquent. It's terribly worrying."

"I don't think so. What are you going to do about him?"

"Oh, we're going to tell him he'll have to go. We'd have done it before, but the thing is, he did save me and Tony, nothing can alter that — and John's very conscientious."

"Heavens! I can't see. How conscientious can you get?"

\* \* \*

But now even Mellanby's patience was at an end. For sheer reckless impudence he had rarely heard anything to beat Roscoe's latest escapade. The other incident had been distinctly more than a little really going too far. As soon as Sally told him the news he mentally gave Roscoe one more night.

Next morning a letter arrived for Roscoe—the first he'd received at the Mellanby house. The contents were evidently not to his liking, for he looked very plum during breakfast and went off in the car afterwards with scarcely a word. When he returned in the evening he was still brooding, and as soon as dinner was over he asked Mellanby if they could have a private talk. Mellanby took him along to the study and gave him a chair. "It's worrying you?" he asked.

"Yes, old man," Roscoe said. "What seems as though I'll have to take you up on that offer of a loan, after all."

"Mellanby looked at him in surprise. "You mean you've found a place that suits you?"

"No, I haven't found anything—and unless I can raise some money quickly I'll have to give up the whole idea."

"Why, what's the trouble?"

"Well, the fact is, I owe quite a bit," Roscoe said. "I hoped the chap would wait and take it a little at a time, when the farm started to pay, but instead of that he's dumping me for the whole lot right away . . . That was the happy news I got in that letter this morning."

"There was a little silence. Then Mellanby said,

"How much do you owe?"

"Oh—a thousand or two . . ." Roscoe gave a rueful grin. "Well, more than that, actually. I suppose I'd better come clean with you . . . Seven thousand pounds."

Mellanby started at him. "That's a lot of money."

"You're telling me, old man . . . Still, it wouldn't be a lot to you, would it? I mean, you're obviously well-heeled."

"It's a lot of money by any standards," Mellanby said.

Roscoe gave a shrug. "I'm told you've given much more than that to a lot of people. I've talked to in the town speaks very highly of your generosity . . . Well, surely I'm a more deserving case than any charity?"

Mellanby looked at him. "Look," Roscoe said, "let me put it this way . . . If you'd known you could save your wife and child from drowning by paying seven thousand pounds beforehand, you'd have paid it, wouldn't you, like a shot?"

"Naturally."

"Well, as it happens, they were saved first, and now you have the chance of settling afterwards. You owe for their lives. You've talked a great deal about gratitude. Okay — this is the payoff."

"You put things very bluntly."

"I've got to put things bluntly. Unless I can raise this money, I'm sunk. You promised to help me, and I need help. I'm claiming it as a right."

Mellanby took up his pipe, and lit it, and puffed away quietly while he considered the position. Finally he said, "All right, Roscoe — I'll be equally blunt. I accept that I have a duty to do — a big one. It's been weighing on me quite a bit. I've been waiting for an opportunity to discharge it. If you'd come to me, as I hoped you would, and said that you'd found the farm was no longer for sale, and needed a few thousand to put you on your feet there, I'd have been glad to help. I still want to help — but I'd like to be quite sure I'll be doing you some good."

"Surely I'm the best judge of that!"

"Even so, I'd like to know a bit more . . ."

"All right," Roscoe said sulkily. "If you must know, he's a colonel in the R.E.'s — or was, Chap named Lancaster. He's retired now. Lives in London."

"Would you think it prying if I asked you how you came to borrow so much money?"

"I would — but I don't mind telling you. It was three or four years ago I was stationed in Kenya, and so was Lancaster. We were good pals. He had a private fortune, lucky chap! Anyway, I got a notion to fit myself up with a bit of property out there in a speculation — nice farmhouse. Everyone said it was bound to go up in value when we smashed the Mau Mau. Lancaster lent me most of the dough, and I bought it. Then the Mau Mau burned the place down. So I'd got a debt, and nothing to show for it. And that's all."

"And now he's asking for the whole capital back?"

"That's right. Wants it urgently."

"Would you have any objection to showing me the letter he wrote you?"

"Well, really . . . Are you calling me a liar?"

"Not at all," Mellanby said mildly. "It's just that I like to see what he says."

"Well, I'm sorry — you can't. I was so annoyed about the whole thing I tore it up and threw it over a hedge somewhere."

"That's a pity . . . How did he know you were staying in the house?"

"I wrote him the other day, out of pure good nature — told him I'd got promising plans and hoped to start paying off the loan pretty soon. I thought it would keep him sweet, but it merely set him off."

Mellanby nodded. "Of course, you could start paying him now with a part of your gratuity — it would show that you were serious about your year's service, it must surely be quite a big lump sum?"

Roscoe gave him a long, derisive stare. Then he

said, "I'll need all that for the poultry farm."

"You still plan to buy one?"

"Of course — once I'm in the clear again. With £7,000 from you, I'll have nothing to worry about."

Mellany nodded again. He suddenly felt very tired. "Tell me, what is Col. Lancaster's exact address?"

"That's my affair, Mellany — there's no need for you to go chasing him up. I've given you all the facts, and they're true — you can take my word for that. . . . If you don't want to put your head just say so."

Mellany tapped out his pipe and got up.

"Well . . . ?" Roscoe pressed him.

"I'll need to think about it," Mellany said. "We'll talk about it again tomorrow night."

★ ★ ★

First thing next morning Mellany drove into town to check up on Roscoe's story. It went against the grain, but after what had happened he felt he had no choice. With the best will in the world, he'd been unable to believe a word of what he'd been told.

The task proved to be even easier than he'd expected. In the public reference library in Bath, copies of the Army List dating back some time were soon dug up for him. It took only a few minutes to discover that there had been no Col. Lancaster of the Royal Engineers in recent years. Roscoe had invented him! But that was only the beginning. Until now, Mellany had taken Roscoe's account of himself as completely on trust. This seemed the moment to verify it. Quickly, he paged through the Lists, searching for a Major Frank Roscoe of the Gloucesters. There wasn't one. Roscoe had invented him, too.

For a little while Mellany sat motionless, thinking back to the first developments in the Roscoe saga. It was difficult now to believe that anything had been done above board . . . that he'd been in the library and drove out to the Plough at Frensey Stoke. There, over a glass of sherry, he learned from the landlord that the season had not been a good one in spite of the recent improvement in the weather, and that at no time during the summer had the Plough been without an empty room.

So there it was — worse, much worse, than Mellany had suspected. There could be no doubt about it now. The Roscoe was a fraud, a swindler, the request for money — everything fitted. Roscoe was a fake and a fraud. A confidence man. No wonder he hadn't wanted newspaper publicity after the rescue!

Depressed and puzzled, he drove home and told Sally the result of his inquiries. She listened in shocked silence. Like Mellany, she had been prepared for part of it . . . but not for all.

"What baffles me," Mellany said, "is how he ever thought he could get away with it. That story of his never even began to sound true."

"Well, he's just not a very good confidence man, darling."

"He's hopeless—I could do better myself! Why did he have to say he was a major in the Gloucesters? And this mystical . . . this mystical . . . in the R.E.S.? Everyone knows about the army list . . . He was heading for trouble right from the start."

Sally looked thoughtful. "When he first told me he was in the army he'd only just met me, of course. He didn't know then that you had money. . . . Perhaps he said the first thing that came into his head and then had to stick to it and embroiler it when he found there were prospects."

There was a little pause. Then Sally said, "Anyway—what are you going to do?"

Mellany shrugged. "Have it out with him, I suppose. Hear what he has to say, and then tell him to clear off. . . . What else can I decently do. . . ? Damn the fellow! It was bad enough having to be grateful to him before—now it's quite intolerable."

## CHAPTER IV

THE showdown, Mellany realized, would inevitably be most unpleasant. As his suggestion, Sally took steps to see that that, apart from the children, they would have the place to themselves for the evening.

It was later than usual when Roscoe came in that evening—and he was by no means in his usual state. Normally he was most particular about his appear-

ance, but today his clothes looked rumpled and dirty and there was a deep scratch all down his left cheek—the result, he said, with a curious jauntiness, of an enormous spider that he had been trying to round a field. The scratch was bleeding a little, and he went upstairs to attend to it. When he came down he joined Mellany and Sally in the sitting room and, as always, helped himself to a large drink before dinner.

"Well, Mellany, let's get this over before dinner, shall we? What have you decided?" His tone was as confident as ever. His eyes were hard and bold.

"I checked up on your story," Mellany said.

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Roscoe stepped forward and gave him a stinging slap on the cheek. Sally sprang up with a cry and tried to reach the phone but Roscoe grabbed her and pushed her back into her chair. She was crying.

"Well," Roscoe said, "now that you've had your little lesson, perhaps you'll agree to talk things over quietly . . . As far as I'm concerned, this is the position. . . . Can't afford to have you go to the police. With my record, it's just not possible. So I'm going to see you don't. I'm going to stay here, and you're going to keep me—and you're going to keep quiet about me. You're going to pretend you like having my money. . . . Is that what you want? Well, the first ones who've done it, if that's any consolation, you'd do it for the same reason the others did—because you don't want to be beaten to a pulp, because you don't want to see your kids suffer—which is what I happen if you talk."

"They'll put you in prison," Sally cried wildly. "You'll be there for the rest of your life!"

"Don't you believe it," Roscoe said. "They always let you out in the end—and I've got a long, long memory. . . . Don't imagine you can get out of it that way. . . . Sooner or later, whatever you told the police, I'd be free—and there's no protection in the world could keep your kids safe from me then."

"You're mad!" Sally said.

"Don't kid yourself, Mellany—I'm as sane as you are. I know what I want, that's all—and how to get it. A short life and a merry one, that's my motto. Take what you want while you can, and my money."

A ring at the doorbell cut him short—a long, insistent ring. On the instant, Roscoe's manner changed. He jerked his head toward the door. "Go and see," Sally—but remember what I said about the kids."

He waited tensely, watching Mellany, while Sally went to the door.

There was the sound of a man's voice in the hall. Mellany listened, straining his ears. Suddenly his heart began to pound. Surely he knew that voice? It must be . . . it was! . . . As recognition came, a great wave of relief flooded over him. Then, as the door opened, he saw a man in a crash and Sherston came in like a cyclone. His face was apologetic, his eyes popping, his big fists clenched. He looked completely beside himself, a man obsessed. He tried to give glance to Mellany. His gaze riveted on Roscoe. "There she is! There she is! Man, I'm going to break your neck. I'll track you to come pawing at my wife, you filthy goat!"

Roscoe said softly: "Don't force me, Sherston." He was holding his hands low in front of him, like a watchful wrestler. "Don't try to start anything with me. You'll only wish you . . ."

The final words were lost as Sherston hurled himself on Roscoe in reckless fury. A wild melee followed. The impetus of Sherston's assault had carried Roscoe to the ground and for a moment or two they fought there savagely, their arms and legs and bodies in constant, violent movement. Then they went half on their hands and knees, crawling and crashing around the room. Mellany moved toward the phone. Before he could reach it, Roscoe, breaking free, landed a jolting punch at Sherston's weakest point—the stomach, and Sherston fell back, writhing in agony.

"I warned you," Roscoe said contemptuously. He seemed to have suffered little damage himself. He was in his mind, a dangerous gangster without a gun. He caught sight of Mellany and took a light step toward him. "Put that phone down!"

Mellany stepped straightened up and grabbed a wooden chair, flung himself on Roscoe again. Roscoe side-stepped and punched him twice with scientific strength. Sherston sagged under the blows. Sally gave a gasping cry. Roscoe was going in again. It would be a massacre. . . . Suddenly, Mellany grabbed a chair, too. Sherston, from the floor, cried: "Hit him, John—hit him!"

Roscoe swung around. "What you, too, little man?"

The two men, now, were on their feet. Sherston's chance. Now he was on his feet again. "Both together!" he yelled. For a split second Roscoe seemed uncertain what to do. Then he turned on Sherston. He was in a real mood. A real mood, anger, raised the chair above his head and struck at Roscoe with all his strength. He felt the blow land. Under its impact, Roscoe staggered back, or a moment he stood swaying. Then, with a groan, he fell heavily to the floor against the fireplace.

Sherston went after him in a frenzy, his own chair raised. . . . But even he could see there was no need to do anything more. Roscoe was lying in a motionless heap where he'd fallen. The fight was over.

Sherston set the chair down and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Thanks, John!" he said. He was still breathing hard from his efforts. "Thanks a lot. You just about saved the day. . . . He was too much for me."

Mellany had dropped to the floor beside Roscoe. He could scarcely believe, now, that he'd done what he had. "Do you think he's all right?" he asked anxiously.

Sherston looked at Roscoe with grim satisfaction. "He'll be—he's only knocked out. . . . He'll be around, soon."

"I'll get some water," Mellany said. He went off rather unsteadily to the kitchen.

"I had to come," Sherston said. "I just couldn't wait to get my hands on him. . . . Do you know what he did? He came to the caravan and tried to attack Eve!"

"I know. . . ." Sally said. "Is she all right?"

"I think so," she fought him off. . . .

"He told us he'd been there."

"He told you?"

"Yes, he boasted about it. It's been dreadful here, George, now—we've had an absolutely ghastly time. Thank heaven you did come, that's all. I don't know what would have happened. . . . He's been holding us prisoner—threatening us—hitting John. . . ."

"No!"

"It's true. . . . He was trying to get money out of us—all sorts of things. . . ."

"Why—the what?" Sherston asked as though he'd like to set about Roscoe all over again.

At that point Mellany returned with water and a towel and began to dab cold drops into the unconscious man's face. Roscoe moaned a little, but he still showed no sign of coming around. After a moment or two, Mellany said: "We'll have to do something about him, Sally. . . . Kira will be in, soon."

"Why don't we take him upstairs?" Sherston suggested.

Sally shuddered. "No, no—he can't stay here. I don't want the children to see him again. I don't want anything more to do with him."

"I'll ring the police," Mellany said. "They'll take him away."

Sherston nodded. "I guess that's the best thing. . . . He broke off, frowning down at the prostrate man. Roscoe's breathing was stertorous. He still hadn't moved. "You don't think we ought to wait till he comes around, maybe? After all, we did go for him with a couple of chairs."

Sally said suddenly: "John, he couldn't have meant what he said, could he? About the children?"

If we told the police, I mean?"

"I don't know," Mellany said. "But we'll have to tell them in any case. We'll just have to put ourselves in their hands."

"If you ask me," Sherston said, "you folks aren't in a state to make any decision right now. Look, what about me taking him along to the caravan for the night—and we can decide what to do about him in the morning? You'd feel different then, I reckon."

"Oh, if only you would. . . ." Sally began to stammer.

"What about Eve, though?"

"I won't worry her if I sit over him with a spanner! Anyway, I don't think he'll be giving any more trouble—he must have taken quite a crack."

Mellany looked at Sally. Her face was pale as straw—the way just about as in. "Well, if you really don't mind having him. . . ." he said hesitantly to Sherston.

"I'm sure it's the best way," Sherston said. "Then we'd better hurry—Kira's due back any minute."

"It's decent of you to take him off our hands, Sherston," Mellany said. "I do appreciate it. We've had a shocking night."

## CHAPTER V

A SORT of peace descended on the house after that—the peace of exhaustion. Neither Sally nor Mellany wanted to talk about Roscoe any more that night.

Sally was on the point of going to bed when the phone rang. It was Eve Sherston, in a voluble

post-crisis mood. "My dear," she exclaimed, as soon as she heard Sally's voice, "what an absolutely fantastic day! George has just told me the whole story. Heaven! I thought I'd had enough to tell you, but from what George says it must have been far worse for you. . . . That man! Are you all right? George says John rallied around splendidly—practically saved his life. . . . you must feel quite proud of him. Anyway, it seems to be all over now—I can't stand hardly believe it."

"I know," Sally said, "it's like some horrible nightmare. How are you, Eve—have you really got over it?"

"I think a man like that should be shut away for good," Sally said. "I'm terribly grateful to you for having him, Eve. . . . Has he given any more trouble?"

"No—we had rather a job getting him into the van, but that's all."

"How is he now?"

"Well, that's actually what I'm ringing you about—he's a little worried about him. He came around all right, but he keeps going off again. His pulse seems quite good and his color isn't bad but he is behaving in a rather odd way. Goodness knows, if we ought to get a doctor called at once, but he thinks now it'll be all right to wait till morning—and Roscoe will probably be quite normal by then. Anyway, he wanted John to know the position—so you tell them!"

"Of course—he's in the bath at the moment," Sally frowned into the phone. "I do hope there's nothing seriously wrong."

"No does George—he says it might be a bit awkward explaining. But I'm sure there's nothing you could hardly have anybody tougher than Roscoe. . . . Anyway, there's the message."

"All right, Eve—thanks for ringing. I'll tell John—and of course he'll be getting first thing in the morning. I hope you manage to get some sleep."

"No, I'm going to take two little pills and make sure! Good-night, Sally."

"Good-night, Eve. Sally hung up, and went along to the bathroom to tell Mellany."

He looked very concerned. "I don't usually like the sound of it," he said. "Do people usually go off again after they've come around?"

"I don't know—I don't see anything surprising about it. . . . Anyway, John, there can't be much wrong with him if his pulse and color are good, can there?"

"I suppose not—but it's rather disturbing. . . . I wonder if I ought to ring Hamley and take him around there right away?"

"Oh, darling, surely it's better to leave things to George—he's the man on the spot, after all."

"You're probably right," Mellany said.

It seemed as though he had been in bed for only a few minutes when the telephone shrilled again. "No!" he shot up in alarm, his nerves jangling, and switched on the light above his head. The time by his watch was a quarter to 3. Sally, in her own bed, was dead to the world and hadn't stirred.

Mellany slipped on his dressing gown, switched the light off again, and went quickly downstairs to take the call there. His heart was thumping.

A ring at that hour could only mean trouble. He snatched up the receiver in the sitting-room, cutting off the devilish din. "John Mellany here," he said.

"John—this is George Sherston." The familiar voice rang rough with agitation. "I'm afraid I've got bad news for you."

"Roscoe. . . ."

"Yes. . . . Something frightful happened—your better believe yourself. . . . John—he's dead!"

"No!" The word was a long-drawn-out whisper of horror. "I just can't believe it."

"I couldn't believe it at first—I thought he must be in a coma."

Mellany clutched at the straw. "Couldn't he be?"

"No, he's dead as a duck. . . . no doubt about it."

Mellany groaned. "George—why didn't we get a doctor right away?"

"I don't know, we ought to have done—but who the hell would have dreamed he'd go out like that? His skull must be as thin as paper. We're in a bit of

a spot—but we can handle it all right. . . . Listen, does anyone else know what happened at your house tonight? Did you tell Kira?"

"No."

"Thank heaven for that! What about the children—did they hear anything?"

"I don't think so—they slept right through it."

"Fine! I've got things pretty well sorted out at this end—I'm taking care of everything. I'd like you to come around, though—we must talk."

"I'll come straight away."

It took him less than half an hour to reach the quarry through the quiet lanes. A light was burning in the caravan. Eve Sherston was standing in the open doorway, silhouetted against the light as she gazed out.

Mellany swung the car in, doused his lamps and limped over to the caravan.

"Hello, Eve," he glanced apprehensively into the van. There was no sign of Sherston. "Where's George?"

"Over there in the bushes," she said. Her voice had a note of panic in it. "Oh, John, I'm so glad you've come. . . . He says he's doing the best he can, but. . . ."

Mellany swung around, following the direction of her pointing finger. There was a faint glow from the vegetation near the verge of the road. He crossed the quarry and plunged into the bushes, thrusting his flashlight aside. At a spot close to the road's edge, but well screened from it, Sherston was

wielding a spade by the light of an electric hand lamp set on the ground. There was a long, deep hole at his feet and he was feverishly shovelling earth back and lumped over his shoulder, rolling down his face in streams. He paused for a second as Mellany appeared, said: "Good man—you've been quick," and went on shovelling.

"George—what's gone on here?" Mellany cried.

"What does it look like?" Sherston said, throwing in another spadeful of earth and roots.

With incredulous horror, Mellany gazed down. Three feet below the surface of the ground he could just make out the death-pale face of Frank Rose. The scratch on the cheek showed like a dark line. The eyes were closed. . . . Then a spadeful of earth

came down.

"Stop!" Mellany shouted. He seized Sherston's arm. "George, are you mad? We can't do this."

"Quiet, man!" Sherston jerked himself free and continued to shovel in the earth. "What else can we do?"

Sick with horror, Mellany turned away. For the second time that night he felt himself utterly inadequate. Groping blindly, he stumbled back to the caravan. "Give me a drink, Eve, for God's sake," he said.

She poured him whiskey, a stiff shot, and he drank it neat.

"George's mad," he said. "Mad!"

"I tried to stop him, John, but he wouldn't listen to me. He'd kept me best. . . . He made me help him—was ghastly! John, I'm terrified."

"You've good reason to be, we all have!"

Soon George climbed into the van and pulled the door shut. "Sorry if I was a bit rough out there, John, but I had to finish what I'd started. Okay! I know where the position is, and I ought to have consulted you first."

"Of course you ought!"

"Well, it's too bad I couldn't, but there just wasn't time for a lot of discussion—I had to use what darkness there was left."

"Why do it at all? We're not criminals. We didn't kill Roscoe on purpose. It was—it was an accident."

Sherston poured himself a glass of water and drank deeply. Then he sat down opposite Mellany. "Now listen to me, John," he said quietly. "I've had a bit longer to think about this than you have, and I reckon I've got the position a good deal clearer. Of course it was an accident—we neither of us intended to kill him. But I damn well intended to half-kill him if I could, and from the way you look at me I would have done it—unconsciously, exactly friendly. Face it, man—we both hated his guts, and we had good reason to. So what would it look like if tonight's story got out?"

"I don't care what it looks like," Mellany said angrily.

"You soon would! Can't you see we wouldn't have a dog's chance? We both went for him with chairs, and he was too strong for him, unconscious. We didn't call a doctor. Instead, we struggled him out here, and he died. I know there



was a good reason for everything we did, but would anyone else think so? Don't kid yourself! There's not a jury that wouldn't bring it in manslaughter." "You were wrong," Mellanby said. "You've put us both in the wrong—hopelessly. What you've done now is criminal."

"Maybe it is, technically, but not any other way—not morally. Anyway, why should you worry? I did it on my own. I'm not asking you to take responsibility for it."

Mellanby frowned. "God—what a mess!" "It's nothing like the mess it might have been!" "You can't be sure of that," Mellanby said. "How do you know the whole thing won't come out? Then where would we be?"

Sherston shook his head. "How can it? Who's to know? All you had to do was tell that Roscoe didn't like the Bath district after all and pushed off somewhere else—you don't know where—and that'll be that. . . . He hadn't any roots here. He hadn't any friends, had he? I wouldn't think so. Who's going to search for him? He came here out of the blue, and he's gone back into it."

"It's not as simple as that," Mellanby said. "Everyone leaves traces. . . . What about his things up in the house—his clothes?"

"Well, you'd have to pack those up double-blind—hide them somewhere tonight and bring them along here as soon as you get the chance. I'll soon get rid of them."

"Suppose someone found him? A dog might. . . . Mellanby looked uneasy, unable to finish.

"You needn't worry," Sherston said. "He's four feet down and well stamped on. . . . By the time I've finished with the place, there won't be a trace."

"Mellanby got to his feet. "Well—I don't know. I'll have to think about it. I must talk to Sally."

"You do that," Sherston said. "Talk to Sally. Ask her if she wants her life ruined. . . . I'll say I'm right—you'll see." He got up and opened the door. "I'm sorry about this, John. You're a man of principle, much more than I am. . . . I know what it means to you. I know it's a heck of a problem."

"All I can say is, I've tried to do the best I can, on both. I honestly couldn't see any other way."

Mellanby nodded. His face was gray and set. "I'll come back later, anyway."

"With the clothes," Sherston called after him. "And, John—be careful! Watch your step!"

Sally said, with an effort at calmness: "The thing is, John, what would happen if you told the truth? Do you think George is right or wrong?"

It was a little while before Mellanby answered. On his way back from the caravan he'd had time to do some hard thinking. He had to be honest with Sally, but he hated having to tell her his conclusions. When at last he replied, it was as though the words were being dragged from him one by one.

"I'm horribly afraid George may be right," he said.

Sally looked at him blankly. "You mean you would be sent to prison?"

"I think it's quite likely," Mellanby said. "But, John, it was sheer bad luck that he died."

"For him and for us?"

"All the same," Sally said.

Mellanby shook his head. "There's another side to that, too. I'm afraid. There's such a thing as forfeiting sympathy. Have you thought what sort of figure I'd cut in the street? Roscoe was a man who risked his life to save you and Tony from drowning—I owed him everything—and a few days afterwards I buried him with a chair. . . . No, Sally, I think we've got to be honest about George—be manslaughter, and we'd get anything up to five years."

"Five years! John?"

"It's happened to others. It would just as easily happen to us."

Presently Sally said, in a different tone: "And suppose we keep quiet about it all—what then?"

"Mellanby gave a little shrug. "Well, the truth, we probably ruin our lives, and if we don't there's a good chance we can carry on as though. . . ." She hesitated.

"As though nothing had happened?" Mellanby said, with bare bitterness.

"No, darling, of course not—I know things would

never be the same again—but at least the children wouldn't suffer."

"I hate the thought of living with a lie all my life. I hate it more than I can tell you. Honestly, Sally, I don't know what we should do."

There was a little silence. Then Sally said, with deep conviction: "Well, I do, darling—I think we should keep quiet. . . . I know how you feel, and I respect your lie, but I think this is a case where you've simply got to sit on your feelings."

There were sounds on the landing as she finished—Kira's voice, a high-pitched laugh from Anthony, pounding of feet. The door had begun. Sally said, in an urgent tone: "John, we've got to decide. . . . Please?"

Mellanby got up from the bed. His face was ashen. "Very well," he said. "We'll take Roscoe's things along to George and he can dig another hole."

\* \* \*

In the afternoon Sally packed Kira and the children off to the park. Directly they'd gone, Mellanby whisked Roscoe's suitcase into the car while Sally kept an eye on the cook and the "daddy" in the kitchen.

It was a sombre meeting with the Sherstons. Awareness of the grave in the bushes hung over everyone like a pall. Eve, suffering badly from reaction, seemed a bundle of nerves.

Sherston took Mellanby back to the burial place. "I'd like you to see for yourself that there's nothing to worry about," he said.

Deep in the bushes, Mellanby gazed down in horrid fascination at the spot. There was no doubt that Sherston had done an efficient job. Where the hole had been, the ground was now quite level, and even while he watched the cat's pawing at it to distinguish it from the surrounding area.

"Where will you bury the suitcase?" he asked. "Right here beside the body—it's the only place in the quarry where the ground's soft enough. I'll shove it in as fast as I can."

"Be careful, won't you? If you were seen. . . . You bet I'll be careful. I'll wait till it's dark, and we will keep watch. . . . Don't worry."

Mellanby nodded again. "What are your plans, George?"

"Well, I thought we'd move on tomorrow—Eve can't wait to get away. Neither can I, for that matter. This place has kind of lost its charm."

"I should think so! Where will you make for?"

"The continent, in the end—but we'll stick around in England till we're sure there's not going to be any trouble. . . . If anything did crop up, of course, we'd need each other—but I'm pretty certain it won't."

"I'll give you a ring in a week or two, just to check up with you that everything's okay." He looked a little anxiously at Mellanby. "I hope you don't still blame me, John. I guess I was a bit high-handed."

"No, I don't blame you," Mellanby said. "If you'd consulted me, I doubt if I'd have agreed—but I don't know. . . . There are pressures on me, George, that's academic now. I've accepted the position, and I shall go through with it."

\* \* \*

CHAPTER VI

THE Sherstons left the district early next day, after a final telephone call to say that the suitcase had been safely disposed of and to wish Sally and Mellanby the best of luck.

With their departure, the active phase of the Roscoe affair seemed to be over. There was still plenty to be done, of course, but nothing more to do on the surface, at least, the Mellanby household reverted to normal.

Then, on the morning of the fourth day, a letter arrived from Roscoe—postmarked "London, N.1," and addressed in a precise and rather elegant hand. It was Mellanby who picked it up. With feelings not unlike the foreboding he'd had when the telephone had rung on the fatal night, he opened it and read it. It was as follows:

"Flat 23, Egham Court, London N.1

"Dear Roscoe, I was surprised and distressed at the contents of your second letter, which I found so painful to me when I scanned here today. The money I gave you was specifically for investment in the company, and as I gather you have not yet closed the deal, it should still be in your possession in full. If you certainly had no right at all to use any part of it for your own purposes—which, judging from your evasive tone, I begin to think you

must have done. Indeed, I am now seriously wondering whether the company ever existed, and whether perhaps I was not taken in by a smooth talker! The purpose of the letter is to tell you that I expect the return of the £7,000 in full and immediately. I will accept no excuses. If I do not receive your cheque by first post on Friday morning, I shall go at once before a magistrate and ask for your apprehension on a charge of false pretences and fraud. In view of our past relationship I deeply regret this, but you have left me with no alternatives. Charles E. Faulkner."

Mellanby went straight to his study and dropped into a chair. The contents of the letter had hit him like a blow between the eyes. Since Roscoe's death there had been a possibility that something awkward might turn up, but the crisis there was now suddenly plunged into was more acute and dangerous than anything he had imagined. It didn't help that he probably ought to have foreseen it. The danger had been signalled with that first letter Roscoe had received, and Mellanby blamed himself fiercely for not having given it more thought, once Col. Lancaster had been exposed as an invention. After all, someone had written an upsetting letter. Roscoe's story about Lancaster had been bogus, but his anxiety hadn't been. A crook from top to toe, he had owed £7,000 which he couldn't repay—had he said no to this man Faulkner. And now everything was plain. That first letter, the one he'd so wisely thrown away, had no doubt asked for the money back—or at least for some accounting. Roscoe's decision to waive off the repayment, had first come to Mellanby with his phony story and his appeal for help—and when that hadn't worked he'd resorted to crude menace. The driving force behind his anti-social behavior was suddenly clear. . . . What wasn't clear was how this new and appallingly imminent danger was to be met.

Mellanby was still groping for an answer when Sally came in search of him. His withdrawal at the early hour had been a mistake, but he was sure that something had happened. She glanced over his shoulder at the letter. "What is it, John—bad news?"

"Very bad, I'm afraid," He pushed it to her. "She read it through twice, slowly."

"So he did owe money," she said, in a flat voice. "Yes."

"And if this man Faulkner tells the police about him, I suppose they'll come here?"

"They're bound to. Straight here, it was Roscoe's last known address."

Sally stared at him, white-faced. "Then what are we going to do?"

"Well, I've been thinking. . . . Somehow we've got to stop the police coming, and I believe I know how it might be done. I'll have to tell you, though, and I'll have to see him today." Briefly, he told Sally what was in his mind. "Is his telephone number on the letter?"

"Yes—Haghtate 031."

"Then I'll ring him right away," Mellanby said. "If he's a decent chap, it may work."

\* \* \*

It was close on 3 o'clock that afternoon when Mellanby sat down at his desk, the modest black of flats in Highbury where Charles Faulkner lived. Flat 23, the porter told him, was on the third floor. Mellanby walked up, drawing out the last moments before the fatal interview. It wasn't that he hadn't a perfectly clear plan in his mind—the long journey up from Bath had given him plenty of time to decide what he was going to say.

He was a middle-aged man, rather frail-looking man, with a deeply lined face and snow-white hair. For a moment he inspected his visitor through the upper lenses of a pair of bifocals. "Mr. Mellanby, I have been expecting you. You are, I think, much more vigorous than his appearance."

Mellanby nodded.

"Do come in, won't you?" Faulkner turned and led Mellanby to a snug but pleasantly furnished sitting-room with a fine open fireplace.

"You'll find that chair quite comfortable. . . . Mellanby sat down, with a word of thanks. The room was a study, with a chair opposite him. There was something almost sinister about his personality, yet in an odd way he had an air of authority.

"Well, now—you've had to want to talk to me about Roscoe. What is it, Mr. Mellanby?"

Mellanby came straight to the point. "Roscoe has been staying at my home in Bath for a week

or two as my guest," she said. "This morning he showed me a letter he'd just received from you. I gather he owes you £7,000."

"He does, indeed,"  
"Well—I've come to settle his debt."

The old man blinked. "You mean—Roscoe has sent the money?"

"No, I mean that I should like to pay it for him," Faulkner started him in astonishment. "Why on earth should you do that?"

"It's very simple, Mr. Faulkner. You see, just over two weeks ago Frank Roscoe saved my wife and my small son from drowning, at the risk of his own life..."

"Really?"  
"You'll appreciate that it's put me under an enormous obligation to him. Now I feel I have a duty to discharge the debt."

"Well, this is most surprising..." For a moment Faulkner gazed hard at Mellanby, his eyes shrouded behind his glasses. Then he gave a slow, disapproving headshake. "I can understand how you feel, of course—but I'm bound to say I think it would be a most quixotic action. You say he showed you my letter, so you must know my view of him. I'm very much afraid the man's a complete rogue."

"Oh, he's a rogue, all right," Mellanby said. "But in an odd sort of way that's an additional reason why I'm so anxious to square my account with him. It isn't at all pleasant to be deeply indebted to a rogue."

"No—I can imagine that... But believe me, Mr. Mellanby, he doesn't deserve your consideration. He's a fraud, an utter scoundrel. He's behaved abominably to me..."

"He's obviously quite unscrupulous. But the fact remains that he's done me the greatest service one man can defer another—risking, as I say, his own life—and it seems to me the only way I can repay him is to save him—on this occasion, at least, from going to jail. Indeed, I'm committed—I promised him before he left, that I'd settle his account for him."

"He's gone, has he?"  
"Yes, I made it a condition that he should leave at once, and he cleared off before I do. I don't know where he's gone to, and frankly I don't care. It's been a most distressing business..."

"What I do know, Mr. Faulkner, is that you'll be doing me a service by accepting my cheque and not pressing any charge against him. Then I can forget all about it."

"Well, I'm very reluctant," Faulkner said slowly. "Mind you, I need the money. I'm not pretending I do, and I certainly shan't get it any other way. But I'm very reluctant indeed."

"You feel he should be punished?"  
"I think the scoundrel should be kept-housed, Mr. Mellanby!"

"I'm asking it as a favor," Mellanby said. "Well, of course, if you put it like that... It will certainly be a very great relief to me."

Mellanby took out his cheque book with an inward sigh of thankfulness. Faulkner's relief would be nothing to him. "It's all a question of what one's prepared to pay for peace of mind, Mr. Faulkner," he said. "I know very well that if you brought a charge against Roscoe, and he was jailed—however much he deserves it—I should like awake at night thinking how he pulled my wife and boy out of the sea and how I could have saved him from prison if I'd taken a bit harder.... So here's the cheque, and I'm grateful to you for taking it."

"Well—thank you," the old man said. "It lifts a great weight from my mind. If you'll permit me to say so, I think your action is a most generous one." He gave a wintry smile, even if it is quite misguided." He held out his knuckly hand. "Let us hope that neither of us is troubled by Frank Roscoe again."

Mellanby's smile was even more wintry. He had never disliked himself more than he did at that moment. "Somehow," he said, "I don't think we shall be."

## CHAPTER VII

WITH the settlement of Roscoe's debt, the danger of police inquiries seemed finally to have passed. Even Mellanby could see no further cause for anxiety on that score.

A brief note of reiterated thanks and good wishes

which arrived from Charles Faulkner the following afternoon was clearly intended to close the episode.

For a day or two, Mellanby continued to feel a slight uneasiness when he picked up the daily post. There was always the chance that Roscoe had left some unpaid bills in the house, or involved himself in some way that Mellanby didn't know about. Anything like that would mean more explanations, again, but his fears proved groundless. No more letters came, and there were no more telephone inquiries. No one even mentioned Roscoe any more. In Bath, he was a forgotten man—and soon the trail would be cold.

There was still a reckoning, though, as Mellanby had always known there would be in the end—the reckoning in his own mind. He had been too numbed with shock at first, too busy grappling with deadly danger later, to allow of much brooding. Now the shock was past, the danger over, and there was no longer any escape from himself and his memories... From the real truth.

He did his best to curb his thoughts. He argued the case through with himself, over and over, stressing everything he could find in his favor. Determinedly, he tried to take a second look at Roscoe's view of his deception. On every practical ground, he told himself, Sally and Sheraton had been right. He'd done the best, the only rational thing, by agreeing to Roscoe's terms. The proof was in the fact that the family was safe. The children were happy—they would never know. Sense and logic approved of what he'd done. In the daytime, sense and logic almost reigned. Sitting in his study, with his work before him, and Sally close at hand, and an air of security all around him, he could, with a great effort of will, put Roscoe from his mind. Buying himself time with social duties and caresses, talking with his friends and colleagues, he could force himself to concentrate. But sense and logic couldn't give him tranquil nights. Will power applied in the waking hours merely left him drained. As the days passed, he found it more and more difficult to get any real rest. The moment he lay down, thoughts of the quarry filled his mind—morbid, ghastly thoughts. The picture of Roscoe's body rotting in his grave obsessed him. He had to get up. For the first time in his life he began to take sleeping tablets—but his brain fought them, so that they always worked too late to do him any good. He began to feel the weight that he could feel in his face became gaunt. It was as though his inner struggle was consuming him.

Sally watched him with growing distress and alarm. She had always known that a woman like her, who devoted love could do, that it would be hard for him to forget, but she had never foreseen anything like this. Desperately, achingly, she tried to think of some new way to help him. Everything that devoted love could do, she had already done. Discussion seemed to have reached its end. She had tried several times to go over things with him again, to lift him out of his morbidity, but she seemed to have lost all power of persuasion. Sometimes she felt that she had even lost contact with him. It was something new in their married life, and it added sharply to her unhappiness. Perhaps, she thought, things would be better if they could get away together. A holiday might do him good, a complete change, a cruise, perhaps, after the children were back at school. Evelyn would probably take care of them for a week or two.... Yet Mellanby seemed so tortured and bag-ridden that he doubted if anything but time would make much difference.

One afternoon—it was nearly a fortnight after Roscoe's death—Sally went into the study to get a letter for John. He was leaning on the desk with his head in his hands, motionless. At the sound of her entry he jerked upward and guiltily turned to her. "The book that I lay open in front of me," Sally put the letter down, then drew up a chair beside him.

"Darling—we can't go on like this."

"But, John, you're going to make yourself really ill."

"Well, you don't imagine I'm doing it on purpose. I've seen the look of distress in her face, and put a hand on hers in swift compassion. I'm sorry... I'm ashamed of myself, Sally. I'm a weakling, I know that. I despise myself for not being able to forget it. But I can't—can't!"

"Oh, John, if only I could help you. If only I could understand why it preys on your mind so—why you can't forget. Why should it be so much

worse for you than for me? After all, I urged you on. Or for George? I'm quite certain he'll not make himself ill over it."

"Please don't misunderstand me."  
"I wouldn't! I said I was made so differently—I'd have thought I had a normal amount of conscience. But I certainly don't see this as you do. Look, darling, I know we've been over it again and again, but I have to keep on saying it—all you did was hit a man twice your size who was wrecking your home and threatening your children—and actually beating George up into a pulp."

"It was an accident. You didn't even hit him very hard—and anyway I'm not at all sure it was the chair that hit his head. It didn't look like it to me. I have to keep on saying it—I'll shoulder that you hit. I think he fell and banged his head on the fireplace—and that was sheer bad luck. Why blame yourself? Heavens, it's not as though you meant to kill him."

"I wanted to kill him," Mellanby said. "Sally gave him a startled look. "Darling, that's nonsense. You probably hated him at that moment, who wouldn't have done? But not in that way... You, of all people."

"I tell you I wanted to kill him," Mellanby repeated. "And not out of hate. You don't understand, Sally. I was frightened of him. Terrified! When I picked up the chair and went for him it wasn't just in anger, or to help George, as it would have been with most men. I did it out of fear—sheer, naked, uncontrolled fear. Fear of his strength, and his size, and his power. I was afraid of all the things he might do. I'd only one thought in my mind at that moment and it was to smash him down, crush him, get rid of him, finish him—just as though he were a man. I don't know what God knows it was a pretty ugly deed and with other people he'd scarcely have felt it—but that's beside the point. If ever a man had murder in his heart, I had at that moment."

"At that moment, perhaps—it's not surprising," Sally was pale.

"If you hit a man with murder in your heart, and he dies, that is murder."

"He was a man, Sally, you afraid."

"It was I who hadn't the guts to keep control of myself. I know what I felt, Sally, and I know what I did. I darsay there are lots of people who would do what I did, and I know that it was all justified. I wish to God I was one of them—but I'm not. I'm ashamed. I've got a conscience gnawing at me day and night, tearing me to shreds."

"Oh, Sally, put her arms around him. "Darling, you've nothing to be ashamed of—nothing at all. You're not being fair to yourself. You've got more real courage than anyone I ever met. John, whatever you felt at the time, he brought it all on himself—every bit of it. It was all his fault."

"He started it, I know. I can argue the case as well as you. But it doesn't alter the fact that I'm going to be haunted for the rest of my life by a feeling of guilt and a squalid secret."

As she looked at his strained, suffering face, Sally suddenly realized how ill-humored was the security she had struggled to preserve. She had been so confident they had chosen the right course—so unimaginatively sure. Now, for the first time, she had doubts. What, after all, was John's physical freedom going to be worth to him, if his peace of mind was shattered? What was it going to be worth to her, watching his torment? What ultimate happiness could there be for the children in a haunted home?

For a while she sat in anguished silence, scarcely daring to frame the question that was in her mind. Then she forced the words out: "John—do you still want to go to the States?"

He didn't reply at once. When he did, it was with an emphasis that surprised her. "No—that's impossible now."

"If you're not coming, I—I won't try to stop you. It would be dreadful—but anything's better than seeing you like this."

He shook his head. "After all that's happened, it's quite unthinkable. I'm committed. Apart from anything else, I gave George my word that I'll see it through, and I can't go on that. It's something I've ruled right out."

"You're sure?"  
"Quite sure. I wasn't leading up to that, Sally, when I started to talk—or anything like it. I shouldn't even mean to tell you what was worrying me. I do"

much. It just came out. I know perfectly well that I've got to put up with it—no better have. . . . Anyhow, perhaps things will seem better now that I've got it off my chest. At least I've confessed to you!"

"Yes, darling," Sally said. "If only I could give you absolution!"

Then one evening after dinner things changed. Kira had gone out for a short walk. Sally and Mellaby were drinking coffee, reading the papers, and occasionally exchanging comments about the news. Sally had the Daily Star, Mellaby the pipe in mouth, was browsing through the local paper, the Bath Gazette. There was a peaceful and pleasantly domestic scene.

Then a headline caught Mellaby's eye. He read down the paragraph, frowning a little. Suddenly he gave a gasp of horror.

The item read:

#### BLACKETT'S LANE BY-PASS

Keedy by Easer? "It is learned on good authority that plans to divert the main Bath-Radbury road through Blackett's Lane and by-pass the village of Everleigh are to be advanced by several means. The decision to expedite the work has been taken following renewed protests by Everleigh residents over the mounting toll of accidents in the narrow village street. Some preliminary work in the lane, including the widening of a bridge, has already been done, and it is now hoped to complete the whole scheme by Easter. The lane, in its new form, will be 30 feet wide and, like the main road, will have a cycle track on one side and a footpath on the other. The Gazette understands that Blackett's Lane will be closed to all traffic from Sept. 15 until its reopening as a by-pass next year."

"They'll find him, of course," Mellaby said. Sally finished reading the paragraph and slowly put the paper down. Her face was ashen. "They might not, John. . . . How deep do they dig when they make a road?"

"I don't know—I expect it varies. . . . But deep enough!"

"More than four feet?"

"At least five or six, I should think, in a case like this—perhaps more. A main road to take heavy traffic would have to have tremendous foundations."

"Perhaps they'll add all the width on the other side—away from the quarry?"

Mellaby shook his head. "For a 30-foot road and two paths they'll tear the whole place up. . . . They're bound to find him. The body's so close to the verge, there isn't a chance."

"It was madness to put it there," Sally burst out. "George said it was the only place soft enough to dig—and naturally he wouldn't think of the lane being widened. . . . We ought to have done, though—we knew about it. . . ."

"We knew about it," Mellaby said, frowning at his wife. "Sally. . . . We're in a frightful mess. They'll discover everything. It'll be the end of us. . . ."

Mellaby got up and began to pace about the room. Slowly his expression hardened. "If they find the body."

Sally stared at him. "But I thought you said. . . ."

"Sally, I'm in this thing up to my neck—almost literally! The situation can't get any worse. . . . We were probably wrong to try to hush things up, but we made the decision and now we've got to go through with it. There's no road back—and I'm not going to give in. I'm going to dig Roncoe up and bury him somewhere else!"

"John!"

"I know! It's unspeakable! The mere thought turns my stomach. Well, it's just have to turn. . . . I'm going to do it, Sally. It's the only way. . . ."

Sally sat frozen with horror. Her whole being revolted at the prospect—it was worse than anything she'd ever imagined. There must be some alternative. But, try as she might, she could think of none.

"Yes—I suppose it is the only way. . . ."

she said at last. "But John, couldn't we try to find George, first? He ought to help—and it would make it easier for you."

"It would, I agree—but how would we start? We haven't the faintest idea where he is."

"Perhaps we could get the A.A. to look for him. You'd have to think of some reason why you needed him urgently, that's all."

Mellaby considered for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't think we can afford to wait for

George—if he's camping in a quiet spot like the quarry it might take ages to find him. We just haven't the time."

#### CHAPTER VIII

EARLY next morning Mellaby drove alone to Blackett's Lane. It took him a little time to find the spot where Sherston had buried the suitcase, but as he pushed the light covering of leaves aside with the iron ferris of his stick his experienced eye at last picked out the tell-tale traces of disturbance—a slight upward bulge, an unsoftened crack, the faint impression of a heel. The place was three or four yards from Roncoe's grave. Mellaby marked its centre with a large stone, so that he would be able to find it more easily at night. Then he started to prospect around for a convenient site.

Back at the house, he reported the results of his reconnaissance to Sally, and they discussed their arrangements. It would be unwise—and unfair, they agreed—for them to go out secretly at night without telling Kira—she might hear the car, and wake and worry. It would be better, Sally suggested, if they said they were going to dine out and go to friends afterwards, and might be back late. It was a little after 11 when they reached the lane. Driving along it, Mellaby kept an eye open for possible parked cars, but the place seemed quite deserted. Once in the quarry, with the lights off, he felt remarkably secure.

Sally, subdued but determined, took up a position in the lane a few yards from where Mellaby would be digging. Mellaby had already donned gun and shovel, and he was busy at his work. He quickly found his marker, hung the electric lamp on a branch so that its diffused light was thrown downwards to the ground—and started to dig.

It was heavy work, and he was soon sweating freely. The need for speed was in his mind all the time and he toiled without resting. The soil, though recently disturbed, had been closely compacted by heavy tread, and it had to be broken up by a series of lunges. It was not long before Mellaby's spade struck the resilient top of the suitcase, more than four feet down. It took him another half-hour to free the case, for he had to open up a much larger hole before he could get the room to get at it. But at last it was out, and he stood back with a grunt of satisfaction.

"All right!" Sally called. It was almost the first time she had spoken for an hour.

"Yes, I've got it," he said, "I'm going to fill in now." Filling was easier, but it had to be done with care. As long as the body was still buried close by, there must be no obvious sign of digging anywhere. Mellaby shovelled and stamped, scraping in the last of the loose soil. When the ground was level he swept leaves over it again and drew the brambles across and obliterated his footmarks by the light of the lamp. Then he picked up the damp suitcase and the tools and joined Sally. The time was just after 12.30.

Together they carried the case and tools and lamp to the new marker. There was no cover now for any bushes and Mellaby had to keep an especially careful lookout. She returned to the lane and mounted guard again and once more Mellaby started to dig. He would need to hack out a trench about five feet by three feet wide to get the necessary depth. A silver of moon was just beginning to show above the trees, and he had to hurry. For 15 minutes he dug without a pause. His muscles were aching now. His hands were blistered. . . . That wouldn't do, he thought—someone might notice. Tomorrow he must wear gloves. . . . Tomorrow! This was bad enough, but tomorrow would be infinitely worse. The boys were making progress. No point in dwelling on horrors to come. At last it was done. In silence they left the quarry.

As they neared the house, Sally began to wonder if Kira would wake. If she did, they would have to say they had had a car breakdown. . . . John, with the marks of his digging still on him, would have to keep out of the way. Very quietly she turned the car into the drive with the beam lamps off and let it trickle to a stop. There was no sound from the house. They entered with the stealth of burglars. No one called out. Evidently the boys were going to be all right. Mellaby went straight upstairs to clean himself up in the bathroom. By the time Sally joined him, he was getting into bed. Five minutes after that he was asleep.

It was after 9 in the morning when Mellaby was roused by Sally's voice and the clink of a cup. He hurried to the door on one elbow, stifly. Sally was sitting in her dressing gown, pouring tea at the little table between their beds.

"Hello, darling," she said. She gave him an affectionate nodder rather than a smile. "Well, do you feel better after four or five hours' solid?"

"I ache a lot more!" he said. "He took the cup she handed to him, and gratefully sipped the hot tea."

"Have you seen Kira and the kids?"

"Yes."

"Any comments?"

"They hoped we had a lovely time! Kira didn't hear us come in—so everything seems to be under control."

"That's a relief. . . . Did you sleep all right?"

"Not really—it took me ages to get to sleep," Sally gave him an odd look. "As a matter of fact, during I'd no sooner closed my eyes than I had the most extraordinary thought. . . . I've been longing for you to wake up so that I could tell you."

"Well, I'm awake now—just about!"

"John, you remember when George rang you up that night, to tell you that Roncoe had died? And how long after the phone call was it before you reached the caravan?"

"Oh—altogether about three-quarters of an hour. What's the leading up to, Sally?"

"John, do you realize that, not counting interruptions, it took you nearly two hours to dig out that new hole last night, working at top speed?"

Mellaby stared at her. "Well. . . ."

"Well, that was the thought that kept me awake. Darling, if George was telling us the truth, he had much less time to dig a much bigger hole—a full-sized grave and a body into it, and start filling it in again, before you got there. . . . Could he have done it?"

A look of puzzlement settled on Mellaby's face. Slowly, he remembered what George had said. "No, I don't think he could," he said.

"He's very strong, of course."

"Even so, I can't see him doing it. It would have taken quite a lot of time to dig a suitable place. Then he had to go and phone me, and he had. And he was digging in a tougher spot than I was. Mellaby shook his head again. "I'd say it was absolutely impossible. . . ."

"Sally, this is fantastic. . . ."

"It is, but it's the right, it means that Roncoe must have died before George said he did, and George must have got on with the digging and not told you about the death until the grave was almost finished."

"That seems incredible!"

"But what explanation can there be?"

"But it doesn't make sense. . . . After all, he didn't know what my attitude would be—I might just as easily have turned to and helped him dig."

There was a little silence. Then Sally said: "Well, darling, facts are facts, aren't they? If what you say about the digging is true, then it must have happened. Unless, of course, you're prepared to consider an even worse alternative."

"What do you mean?"

"That it's obvious? If Roncoe died when George said he did, then George must have started digging the grave when Roncoe was still alive!"

Mellaby said: "What a horrible suggestion!" He looked appalled. "That can be ruled out right away."

"I'm beginning to wonder," Sally said. "We don't really know George very well, do we? We don't know what he's capable of."

"We know him well enough for that. I should think," Sally gazed at her incredulously. "Why, it would have been deliberate murder—just as much as if George had gone in to Roncoe and hit him with a spanner."

"Perhaps he did just that!"

"Sally, you haven't any right. . . ."

"I've as much right as George had to keep the truth from you," Sally said stubbornly.

"You haven't the right to fling trifling accusations like that around."

"Darling, I've been thinking about this for hours. I'm not just talking wildly. . . . Look, you said yourself that digging the grave without telling you about the death wasn't murder—and I agree. If George had merely been concerned with the safety of both of you, he'd have phoned you first—so that isn't the explanation. If he'd suspected that Roncoe might die, and that he'd have to dig a grave, he'd have straight up to the house, he'd have called a doctor right away, if only for his own sake—anybody would. So that isn't the explanation, either."





to it. A bald, plump man in a pair of very tight shorts was playing ball with an equally plump youth on the grass outside the door. From the caravan came an appetizing smell and the sound of frying.

Mellany waited till the ball had come to rest, and then addressed the man. "I'm sorry to bother you," he said, "but we're looking for some friends of ours—a man and a woman with a cream caravan and a black cat. We understand they were here last night."

"That's right," the man said. "They were our neighbors. Very nice people.... They left this morning."

Mellany nodded. "They didn't happen to say where they were thinking of going next, did they?" "As a matter of fact, they did," the man said. "This side was a bit too lively for them—they said they were going to some place on the other side of Monmouth.... not a camp, I gathered—just a quiet spot someone had recommended to them."

"Did they mention the name of the place?"

"I believe they did, but I'm dashed if I remember it now. Something 'Wood,' wasn't it, Dennis?" The youth looked vague. "A Welsh-sounding name. Just a minute, let me get my map out."

The man disappeared into the caravan. Mellany and Sally eyed each other anxiously. In a moment he was out again with an ordnance survey map of the district, which he opened out on the grass. For a few seconds he studied it. Then his finger pounced. "That's the place—Trefant Park Wood.... I knew it sounded Welsh.... A few miles to the west of Monmouth, and seven or eight from where they were, a large area of green was shown. Trefant Park seemed to be the name of the whole area. He looked at Sally. "Well, I suppose we'd better go there."

\* \* \*

It was nearly 11 o'clock when they dropped steeply down into the little town of Monmouth. The total area of Trefant Park Wood was nine or 10 square miles. The ground was undulating, with a highest point of about 400 feet. Not all of it was wooded—white patches on the map indicated open spaces in the interior. The place was completely girdled by a minor road, which seemed to be the obvious starting point for the search. From the edge of the forest a dozen tracks ran off into the woods—the whole place appeared to be very sparsely inhabited. They were going to meet, Mellany thought, a lot of luck.

It took them an hour to make the circuit. Repeatedly they stopped, to inspect promising but half-concealed sites beside the road, or to seek in formation at the scattered cottages. By mid-afternoon they had still found no trace of the van.

It was in the late afternoon, when they had almost given up hope, that they found what they were looking for. There was the caravan.

Sally stopped the car. She looked at the house as though she couldn't quite believe it. Mellany, with a grant of satisfaction, examined the caravan through the glasses.

"Can you see them?" Sally asked.

"Not a sign—but if the car's there, they must be."

She reached for a cigarette, and lit it. "How do you feel, darling?"

"Pretty keyed up...."

"So do I.... I wish they hadn't stopped in quite such an isolated place."

"Why....? You're not expecting Sherston to get violent, are you?"

"I shouldn't think so—though it he did kill Roscoe...."

"If.... I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. Sally.... We'll feel our way, and go easy on accusations to start with. If you do get a chance, take Eve off on her own and find out what she remembers. We'll decide the next step when we've compared notes.... All right?"

"Then I'll, darling."

"All right, go!"

## CHAPTER X

AS Sally braked beside the car, the caravan door opened and Eve Sherston looked inquiringly out. For a moment she stared at them, then, her expression as blank and unbecoming as though they'd been complete strangers. Then she smiled. It was the familiar fascinating smile—but

this time you could almost hear it click on.

"Well, of all things!" she exclaimed. She turned and called into the caravan. "George, it's the Mellany!"

Sherston appeared in the doorway beside her. He, too, looked pretty blank. "Why, hello, you two.... this is a surprise...." His tone grew heartier. "Well, what do you want to do again—do come along in.... Funny thing, we were saying only last night it was about time we rang you. How did you manage to find us?"

"It wasn't too difficult," Mellany said. "We got the mooring people to help—and you left quite a good trail.... How are you both?"

"We're fine, thanks—been enjoying a good rest. Well, what about a drink to celebrate?" He reached tentatively for a bottle from the table. There was whiskey and sherry, Mellany saw, and four clean glasses set out on a tray.

"We're expecting some friends along later," Sherston explained. "Nice young couple we met in Gloucester the other day—but they won't be here yet.... Will you have something, Sally?"

"No, thank you," Sally said. "It's a bit early for me."

"And for me," Mellany said.

"Sure? Oh, well...." Sherston looked hard at Mellany, and then suddenly to notice the seriousness of his manner. "Nothing wrong, is there?"

"As a matter of fact," Mellany said, "there is. Things have been going wrong ever since you left. That's why we're here."

"Oh, lord!—had news, eh? In that case, I think perhaps I'll have a drink, if you don't mind." Sherston poured himself a sizable whiskey and drained it off. After a moment he gave a very grin. "Right—now I'm fortified.... What's the trouble, John?"

"Sally looked at Eve. She was leaning forward with her arms on the table, listening intently. There was clearly no hope of detaching her at present.

Mellany said slowly, "Well—the first thing that happened was a letter from a man whom Roscoe had defrauded of £7,000."

Sherston's jaw dropped. "No....!"

"We were pretty shaken ourselves," Mellany said.

"No, I'm not surprised.... Do you mean the letter was to Roscoe?"

"No, it was to Roscoe. From a man named Faulkner. There'd been some correspondence between them and he knew the address."

"What did the letter say?"

"It said Faulkner was going to put the police on to Roscoe. I knew we couldn't risk any inquiries. So I went to see Faulkner and paid him the £7,000 to keep him quiet. I said I was doing it out of gratitude to Roscoe."

"Good God!—that was pretty drastic.... Wasn't there any other way?"

"No, I couldn't think of one."

"Why on earth didn't you get in touch with me right away?"

Mellany shrugged. "I had to move quickly—it was a question of hours."

"I see.... Well, I'll pay my share, of course, if you don't mind waiting a bit. I must say it seems a lot of money to throw away—but I can see your problem."

"Well, wasn't the worst problem," Mellany said grimly. "We learned a few days ago that the council are going to widen Blackett's Lane. They're bound to break up the verges—and if Roscoe's body is still there when they do, they'll find it."

There was a moment of absolute silence. Sherston sat very still. Eve's lovely complexion had turned bloodless.

"Sally said, 'Eve, wouldn't you like to come out for a bit while they talk about it? It's so horrible.' Eve shook her head. 'I want to hear....' When are they going to start, John?"

"The most any day now."

"What a piece of lousy luck!" Sherston said. "Who'd ever have thought of a thing like that? A narrow lane that leads nowhere...." He broke off, his face dark. "Well, we'll have to get to work again, that's all—move the body to a new place."

"Sally and I have already been at work," Mellany said quietly.

"What?" There was a sharper note in Sherston's voice now—sharper and more apprehensive than the slight smile seemed to warrant. "What's your secret sense of guilt about the body in the grave?"

"Sally and I have already moved the suitcase," Mellany said. "We'd no idea it would be so easy

to find you—we thought we'd better go ahead on our own.... It was quite a job—we spent the greater part of a night out there...."

Sherston had finally recovered his poise. "I really am sorry about this, John—you and Sally have been carrying the whole thing on your shoulders.... Anyway, I'll take care of the body—you needn't be about any more.... I can easily manage it on my own."

Mellany felt almost sure now. With a glance at Sally, he moved in to the assault. "You certainly did disagree about that," he said.

There was a moment of silence. Then Sherston said, "I should—I'm a good bit stronger...."

Mellany shook his head. "I don't think that was it.... In fact, I know you couldn't have done it so fast."

Sherston ran his tongue over his dry lips. "What are you suggesting?"

"I'm not suggesting anything—yet. I'm merely asking you for an explanation."

"There's nothing to explain. You're wrong—that's all."

"I'm quite sure I'm not wrong. It's something I happen to know about."

Sherston shot a glance at Eve, avoiding Mellany's eye. He said nothing.

"Of course," he said, went on, "one explanation could be that Roscoe was in a much worse state than I thought. Perhaps you knew he was going to die, and dug the grave in readiness?"

"No—on the whole I don't think I do. There could be another explanation. Perhaps you killed him because you hated him."

"You're bound to be out of your mind!"

"Well," Mellany said, "it's something we shall have no difficulty in checking up on when we move the body. When we move it, Sherston—you and I. If by any chance you did kill him, there'll almost certainly be marks."

Mellany waited. He hated the role of inquisitor.

"I've been afraid this might happen, ever since the night.... I thought you'd probably realize there hadn't been any time for you to get.... You're quite right, of course. I did kill him," said Sherston.

There was a little gap of horror from Sally. Eve, wide-eyed, looked up. "He didn't mean to, Sally—I'm sure he didn't!"

"No," Sherston said, "I didn't mean to. It's true I hated him—more than anyone I've ever met—but I'd never have done that.... You've got to believe me, John."

"What happened?"

Sherston took a long breath. "It was just after midnight. Eve had taken her tablets and was asleep on the bed over there—dead to the world. I was sitting out here, and Roscoe was on the bed in the end room—only half-conscious. I thought, Then, suddenly, there was a noise, and I looked up, and he was coming out, crazy-eyed and lurching a bit, with his hands raised in front of him. Well, he caught hold of me, and we struggled. He wasn't as strong as he had been, but he was still strong. I managed to get him back into the end room and we fell on the rug together. He was like a wild animal—I knew he'd kill me if he got the chance...."

"I was fighting for my life, John. When I suddenly felt my hands at his throat I gave him all I had. I knew the next thing I knew I'd sagged back and I saw that he was dead. And that's the whole truth. I killed him—but I swear to God I never intended him to die. I was simply defending myself."

"And me," he said. "I did kill him," Mellany said, in a flat voice.

Sherston gave a shamefaced nod. "It was a lousy trick, I know...."

"It was unspeakable," Sally said with passion. "How could you do that?"

"The way I saw it, I had no option. When you're in a real jam you think about yourself first of all. Anyway, there it is—the whole squalid truth. Now it's up to you. If you give me away, I'm finished, of course. Nobody will believe now I didn't do it on purpose. I'll mean jail for life."

Mellany passed a weary hand over his face. "What about Eve? You told her about it, I suppose?"

"Yes," Eve said. "I knew, George woke me and told me what had happened, after—after Roscoe was dead. He told me what he was going to do, and I was so sure of what he was saying of the blame. I was frightened. I didn't think you'd believe him, either, John. I'm sorry.... I know how you must have worried."

Mellany got slowly to his feet. "Well—there doesn't seem to be anything more to say, does there?" "What are you going to do?" Sherston asked. "I don't know, I'll have to give me time to think." "Is it worth my while to move the body?" Mellany shrugged. "Please yourself!" "I'll take a chance on you, then—I'll do it tonight."

"You can't, tonight. The place is under the moon." "Then tomorrow night. You can forget about it, anyway—I'm its responsibility now. I'll take care of everything. I don't expect you to forgive me, but I can't really help you save me time. I'll give you an account of Roscoe. Anyway, I'll give you a ring when the job's done, and hear the verdict. Okay?"

Mellany gave a barely perceptible nod. "Let's go, Sally," he said.

They drove away up the slope in a brooding silence. Sally's feelings were so mixed that she found it difficult to sort them out. She was both appalled and relieved. The truth had been very different from what she'd imagined—better in some ways, much worse in others. The thing that had shaken her almost more than Sherston's admission of the killing was the discovery of Eve's part in it. It was a shock to find that the girl who had been Mellany's having other thoughts. His face was set in a deep, puzzled frown. It wasn't until they reached the high road and turned for home that the silence was broken. Then Sally said: "What are you thinking, darling?"

"That it's been a ghastly business—and still is," Mellany said.

Sally nodded. "I suppose it could have been worse, though. It could have been murder. And at least everything's explained now."

"We've only got Sherston's word for that happened."

"Don't you think he was speaking the truth?"

"How can one tell?"

"Well, darling," Sally said, after a moment, "whether he killed Roscoe accidentally or on purpose, he did kill him, and he's got to be made to blame himself for any more—that's the main thing."

Mellany granted. Presently he said: "Would a semi-conscious man really become dangerous as so quickly?"

"I suppose he might."

"Wouldn't he show some sign? Sherston was only a few feet away from him—a change of breathing would have been enough. I'd have thought he'd have been more prepared. And could anyone sleep through a fight in a caravan? The din must have been terrific—you only have to step into the place to start it shaking."

Sally said: "Yes, unhappily, and Mellany felt silent again. Perhaps, he thought, it would be better not to try to discuss it any more at the moment—or make any decisions, either. After a night's sleep, things might seem clearer. He took out his pipe and began to fill it, using the last few shreds in his pouch.

"Can we stop in Monmouth and get some tobacco," he said. "I'm right out."

"Of course," they were already entering the outskirts of the town and Sally began to look for a shop. Most of them seemed to be shut. "It must be early-closing day, the main reason."

"Oh, well, never mind. I'll probably be able to get some in Gloucester."

They continued through the town and crossed the river. As they approached the station, Mellany suddenly said: "There's one open," and pointed to a little general shop with a tobaccoist's license. Sally looked around for a place to stop. A train had just come in, and there were a lot of people and cars about on the narrow road. The station yard seemed the best place. She pulled in, and they walked back to the shop together and made the purchase.

As they approached the car again, Mellany noticed a man strolling along near the curb with a bundle of papers under his arm—a neatly dressed, elderly man with white hair. Mellany couldn't see his face, but there was something vaguely familiar about him. In an unbidden way, the man turned—and their eyes met. Mellany gave a gasp of astonishment. Of all people in the world, it was Charles Faulkner.

The old man looked even more startled than Mellany. For a moment he stood stock still. Then

a smile of pleasure spread over his face and he advanced with hand extended. "Mr. Mellany! Well, you're the last person I expected to meet here."

"Excuse my coming," Mellany said, starting. Then he remembered that Sally didn't know the man. "Sally, this is Charles Faulkner—I took that cheque from him, remember? My wife, Mr. Faulkner."

Faulkner gave Sally an old-fashioned bow. "A really remarkable coincidence," he said. "But there—the world's a small place. I once ran into an old friend on the quay side at Bangkok whom I hadn't seen for 20 years. . . . Well, how are you, Mellany? No other trouble over that scoundrel Roscoe, I hope?"

"No," Mellany said.

"I'm glad to hear that. I still think your husband's actions were quite nice, Mr. Mellany, but I must admit his generosity has made a great difference to me." Faulkner's shrewd eyes dwelt on Mellany for a moment. "Do you often come to these parts?"

"Very rarely—we've been visiting some people we know. What are you doing, Mr. Faulkner—holiday-making?" Mellany was looking at the papers under Faulkner's arm.

"Right," Faulkner said, "just for a few days now. . . . I've always been fond of the Forest of Dean—especially at this time of year."

"It's certainly very nice," Mellany agreed. "No other news in Monmouth, are you?"

For a fraction of a second Faulkner seemed to hesitate. "Yes," he said.

"At the Crown?" It's a nice inn—we had an excellent lunch there today."

"No. . . ." Again there was that trace of hesitation. "I'm at the King's Arms—it's also very good. . . ." Faulkner smiled benignly at Sally through the lenses of his glasses. "Are you spending the night at the Crown? If so, perhaps you'd care to join me in a glass of something after dinner?"

"That's very kind of you," Sally said, "but we're actually on our way home now. . . . Children, you know."

"Ah, yes. . . ." Faulkner glanced at the car. "Well, in that case I must detain you. . . . It's been a pleasure in meeting you again, Mellany. I shall always be grateful to you. Good-by, Mrs. Mellany."

He smiled again and raised his hat, and walked slowly away with short, prim steps.

"What a sweet old boy!" Sally said, as they got back into the car.

"Yes," Mellany said, in a preoccupied tone. He was watching the retreating figure. As Sally turned her head in the direction of Gloucester, he swivelled round and continued to look through the rear window. Faulkner had stopped walking and was gazing after them. Then there was a sharp bend in the road, and Mellany lost sight of him."

"Well—extraordinary isn't the word for it," he said.

"It's the kind of thing that's always happening, darling."

"Oh, I know one often meets acquaintances in the odd places, but. . . ." He broke off, frowning. "I'd have said it'd just come off that train."

"What on earth makes you say that?"

"Well, the papers he had under this arm—a Times, a Spectator, and Punch. Just the thing for a five-hour journey from London—but an odd collection to carry about otherwise."

"Was it the London train?"

"I don't know," Mellany said.

He helped into silence again. The car sped on. They had covered several miles when Mellany suddenly said: "Do you mind stopping again, Sally—at a telephone box?"

"Darling, you're behaving very strangely. . . . What's the matter?"

"I'd just like to make sure about something."

"They went on for another mile. Then Sally broke. 'Well, there's your box. . . . Do you want any change?'"

"No, thanks. . . . I won't be long."

Sally watched him enter the box, look up a number, and dial. She saw him talking. His face looked strained. He talked for only a moment or two. Then he came quickly back to the car.

"Well?" she said.

"Faulkner isn't staying at the King's Arms—they don't know him there. . . . But he's fantastic."

Sally stared at him. "But that's fantastic. . . . Why should he say he was?"

"He had to say something, because I pressed him. . . . Sally, I'll swear he'd just come off that train, believe he was waiting for someone to pick him up."

"But that's what he said so. . . . He didn't have to tell us he was staying."

"He might not have wanted us to know he'd come down for some special purpose. . . . Sally, I don't believe meeting him there was anything but coincidence. Think of it! We came here because we want to talk to the Sherstons about Roscoe, and we meet a man I've only seen once before in my life, who's connected with Roscoe almost as much as we are. It's almost incredible that that could be just by chance. . . . And he told us a phony story. Sally, perhaps he's here to talk about Roscoe, too!"

"Darling, there's something very odd going on. I may be wrong—but I've got to make sure. . . . Sally, let's go back to the caravan."

"Perhaps."

"How could there be? I don't understand at all."

"Neither do I," Mellany said. "All I know is that I'm not satisfied—and with anything. If you ask me, there's something very odd going on. I may be wrong—but I've got to make sure. . . . Sally, let's go back to the caravan."

Twenty minutes later they were back on the slope overlooking the camp. They had been away from it for a little over an hour. At Mellany's suggestion, Sally stopped their car at a point where it was still hidden from below by the curve of the hill, and they went cautiously forward on foot till they could see over the brow.

"Look—there's another car," Sally said.

Once again, Mellany stopped the camp through his glasses. The second car was a smart saloon. The caravan door was open, but the van itself appeared to be empty.

"I don't see anything sitting out on the other side of it," Mellany said. "I can see someone's foot—"

"Their guests must have arrived, darling—the young couple. . . ." Faulkner wouldn't have a car here, not in the camp, but in the train."

"That's true. . . ." Mellany looked a bit deflated. "Still, we may as well make sure now we're here."

"Won't we have to have some reason for coming back?"

Mellany thought for a moment. Then he took his gold watch from his wrist and slipped it into his pocket. "I lost my watch somewhere," he said.

"The strap broke. . . . That'll do."

They walked back to the car and got in. Mellany said: "I should let her run down in neutral—it'll be quiet. . . . Sally, I don't hear of it, but the car slowly gathered speed, trickling silently down the grassy track and coming to rest almost exactly opposite the saloon. Mellany got out quickly, and together they walked round to the other side of the caravan."

A rug was spread on the grass in the yellowing evening sun, with bottles on a tray beside it. There were four people there—the Sherstons and two men. All four were on their feet, as though they'd sprung up in alarm at the sound of the car door. One of the men was Charles Faulkner!

But it wasn't on him that the gaze of Mellany and Sally fixed itself. It was on the other man, spine-chilling horror—it was on the other man.

For the other man was Frank Roscoe!

## CHAPTER XI

IT was a shattering moment. Sally gave a cry and clutched at the side of the caravan for support. Mellany looked at her, his face stiff with horror and disbelief. It was possible—it couldn't be. . . . He'd actually seen Roscoe dead in the grave. . . .

For a second or two, no word of any kind stirred the tableau. Faulkner had taken off his glasses and was quietly pointing them. Sherston and Eve looked almost childishly self-conscious. Roscoe was staring at Mellany. It was he, turning on the others with the authority of leadership, who harshly broke the silence. "You fools—I thought you said they'd gone home!"

Faulkner gave a faint shrug. "I watched them drive off. How could I know they would come back?"

"I guess we've had it, Frank," Sherston said.

Sally sat down on a hummock of grass, holding her head in her hands. "I don't know what to do."

Mellany looked round him in a dazed way. He could still scarcely believe it—yet this big man,

with the remembered voice and the trace of a scar still on his cheek, was undoubtedly Roscoe, in the flesh and formidably alive. He could never have been in the grave. He hadn't died. As well as that, Mellany was feeling something else now. The final lifting of a giant weight. Roscoe was alive! The long, hideous nightmare was over. No more digging, no more racking anxiety, no more self-questioning. . . . But still incredulity lingered. How . . . ?

Roscoe said, in a mocking tone, "Maybe you'd like to pinch me!"

A deep, convincing anger took possession of Mellany. It had been a plot, of course. . . . He could see it all now—the pattern of it, anyway. . . . The whole thing had been a diabolical conspiracy between these four fronts of the battle. The golden opportunity, the careful reconnaissance at his home, the "accidental" encounter with the caravan . . . Roscoe's wolf act, the deliberate unpleasantness, the inevitable provocations—all leading up to the staged fight. . . . The planned removal of the "unconscious" man, the phony "death," the busy "burial" . . . The well-measured letter from Faulkner, leaving Mellany no option but to go. . . . Sherston's cunning concession when exposure loomed, his eagerness to move the non-existent host on his own. . . . Conning, resourceful, utterly unscrupulous. . . . Doesn't anyone of mind mean anything to any of you? he burst out. "Don't you realize what we've been through?"

"Oh, you're too soft, Mellany," Roscoe said. "You fret too much. You should learn to take things in your stride."

"It was monstrous," Mellany said. "The most monstrously wicked thing I ever heard of. If there's such a thing as retribution. . . ." He broke off, and darted down beside Sally. "Darling—are you all right?"

She raised her head and nodded. The color was beginning to creep back into her cheeks. "I'm better now."

"Can I get you some water?"

"No, I'm all right. John, can't we go?"

"We will very soon," he said. He got up and faced them again. He had himself more under control now. "How did you do it, Sherston? How did you manage it? I saw you cover him up. . . ."

Sherston gave a feeble grin. "Not him, Mellany. It was a window-dresser's dummy—one of the few props sacrificed for the cause."

Four feet down, with a scratch mark on the cheek—it would have deceived anyone in the 'oor light. Quite well executed, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes—a most polished performance!" Mellany said. "All of it."

"Thank you! I'm glad you're beginning to take a bit more calmly. I was bad luck, of course—if it hadn't been for that road widening nonsense, we'd have got clean away with it. I quite thought we had."

"You were running some pretty big risks, weren't you?" Mellany said. "Suppose I'd insisted on going to the police when I first saw the grave?"

"What!—and invite a five-year jail sentence? It wasn't very likely, was it? Not after the first shock. No one ever has!"

"You mean you've worked this before?"

Sherston's grin broadened. "There are one or two other chaps around who firmly believe they killed Roscoe in a fight—aren't there, Frank?"

"There are," Roscoe said. He had lit a cigarette and was beginning to look more at ease. "You're the only sucker in the game, Mellany. One bore every minute, you know! Not all suitable material for this particular routine, of course—but then we've got other lines."

It seems a very tedious way of making £7,000," Mellany said.

"Do you know a better one? It came off, didn't it—or would have done if it hadn't been for that road of yacs. That's the acid test—does it work? And £7,000 in a month is hardly to be sneered at—that tax free, don't forget! Is it, Charles?" Roscoe's hand dropped heavily on Faulkner's shoulder. "This is the realascal, Mellany. A great actor. . . . But then we're all quite proficient, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh, you're proficient, all right," Mellany said. He was realizing more and more the consummate trick that had gone into the plot, the brilliant insight. . . . Roscoe giving precise details of his crime. . . . Roscoe making himself out to be footloose and friendless, so that when the time came his disposal

would seem safe. . . . The delicately poised Jekyll-and-Hyde act, to make sure he wasn't thrown out too soon. . . . Eve's build-up of the jealous husband. . . . Sherston's roughness and tough talk. . . . Faulkner's reluctance over the cheque. . . . They hadn't missed a thing.

"You're a fine, predatory gang!" Mellany said. "That's it," Roscoe agreed. "That's what we are. Opportunity-hunters on perpetual safari. Merchant adventurers! And you'd be surprised what a lot of opportunities there are, Mellany. All you need to do is get to know the right people—and believe me, you don't have to be interested. You just look around to see who you can do a good turn to—the world's full of rich people who need helping in some way. . . . Rescuing your wife and kid is only a lucky break. The odds are that kind of chance doesn't often happen. But if you keep your eyes open you can always find people who need a bit of a leg-up. You put them in your debt and you move on from there. If they turn out to be foolish, easily hoodwinked people, you use Plan I—that's the straightforward confidence stuff. If they're sensitive, complex characters with consciences, you try Plan II—that's the one we used on you."

"You're very frank," Mellany said.

"Well, old man, considering what you know about me already, there's not much point in being anything else, is there? They're very call a fair cop! Not that we're in any real danger, mind you—we've always got our bolt holes open. If you showed any signs of causing trouble, we'd scatter at once. I'd be out of the country before the police had even got the particulars down. But I'm sure that's not going to arise—you're not going to give us away. Aren't you a respected figure in Bude—prominent on committees, looked up to by everyone, wife with hosts of friends, growing children socially welcome—all that sort of thing. . . . What do you think would happen if you told your story as it is? Maybe you haven't thought what it would sound like."

"As a matter of fact, I haven't," Mellany said.

"Then you'd better think fast, chum. I can just see your evidence spreading all over the papers how you thought you'd killed a man, and how you'd saved the lives of your wife and child, so you let your accomplice bury him secretly and told a lot of his friends how he'd gone away, and kept the fact from the police. And how you planned to dig up the body when things got too hot for you! Oh, yes, all your friends are going to like that a lot—you'll look such a fine citizen, such a low-and-order man."

Mellany repeated his damp forehead. "I suppose it wouldn't sound very nice."

"Nice—it would sound bloody awful. And that's not all—you'd be a laughing stock. You'd never have any respect again. And all the other wives would be looking pityingly at your wife and thinking God they didn't marry a cowardly weakling like you."

"See, Sally, was on her feet, her eyes blazing. "It's not true what you're saying—any of it. He's not weak, and I'm proud of him, and so would anyone else. He did everything he possibly could—more than he could. Didn't he try to stand up to you even though you're twice his size? You that should be ashamed. He wasn't scared of going to the police—it was me. Everything he did was for me."

Mellany looked at Sally. "I'm afraid he may be right, darling."

"But, John . . ."

"After all," Roscoe interrupted, "this won't be the first time you've kept discreetly quiet for the sake of your family and your reputation, will it? Of course, we wouldn't let you be the loser—you

can have your £7,000 back. That goes without saying. You found us out, so it's only fair. Anyway, we want to make things easy for you." Roscoe looked round the waiting circle of conspirators. "All right with you, George? Eve? Charles?"

There were nods from each of them in turn. "That's settled, then. We won't have made a penny out of this thing ourselves. Mellany, and you won't have lost anything—so what is there for you to worry about? As a matter of fact, we'll be really generous." Roscoe stepped over to the caravan and took out a cheque book and wrote out a cheque against the bank of £7,000. "There you are. A thousand extra for pain and suffering!"

Mellany looked at the cheque. "You think £2,000 covers what we've suffered?"

Roscoe grinned. "I'd suffer a lot for that myself. It'll pay for a nice long cruise for the whole family, anyway—help you to get over things."

"Will it be honored?"

"You needn't worry, Mellany—it won't bounce."

"Well . . ." For a moment Mellany still held back. Then, with a shrug, he took it. "It is my own, after all. And I don't see why I should wreck my life on account of a pack of scoundrels."

"John!" Sally said, in a voice of anguish.

Mellany looked at her stonily. "Is no good—I just can't stand any more trouble. Come on, let's go home and try to forget all about it." He turned away before she could say any more, and started to walk toward the car. Sally followed, a dejected pace behind. The others went along, too. Mellany dropped heavily into the driving mirror. Sally took the seat beside him. The engine sprang to life. Mellany shook his head out of the window. "You will all be jailed in the end, I'm sure of that. Someone will get you and . . ."

He let in the clutch, and the car moved away up the slope. The last thing he saw in the driving mirror was Eve moving toward Roscoe, smiling. They were all smiling.

Sally was quiet till they reached the top of the hill. Then she suddenly exploded. "John, stop! We've got to talk."

Wall, Mellany said that surprised her, Mellany swung the car off the track into the trees and turned the engine off. "What is it?"

"John—we've got to tell the police."

"We've been exposed!" "You think so?"

"We've got to tell the darlings. We want to keep quiet before—I can see that now. I know it was all my fault, but we were wrong. We can't do it again. We must!"

"Are you sure?" Mellany said. "It couldn't have been made easier for us, you know. It won't be like last time—there's no danger any more, nothing to worry about. If we keep our own counsel now, nothing more can possibly happen. It really is all over."

"It's not all over, John—only for us. You heard what they said—they'll do it again. They'll go on doing it. They'll make other people suffer, just as we did. Surely you agree?"

Mellany said quietly: "Of course I agree."

She stared at him. "But—you talked as though you were going to let them go on and persecuting you. You took the cheque as though it settled everything."

"I had to, Sally. If they'd had the slightest doubt about me, it's the police they'd have called out and got clean away. I had to make them feel absolutely sure and safe, so that they'd stay. . . . that's all. I couldn't let you know, could I?"

"Oh, I was suddenly glinted in her eyes—tears of relief. "Oh, I'm so glad. I didn't realize. I couldn't understand what was happening to you—you seemed like a stranger. You were so terribly convincing."

"The with luck," Mellany said grimly. "They will be there when the police come. I thought I was being rather a ham myself." His hand closed on Sally's. "It's going to be pretty tough for us, Sally, because you do so much for me."

"Yes, I know. Will it be as bad as Roscoe said?"

"Well—somehow, I doubt it. After all, there are worse things in the world than being a sap!" He leaned forward and coughed out on his engine. "I'm wrong—well, we'll just have to see it through, that's all."

"Yes, darling." Sally said. Her face was clear, her eyes trouble-free. "We'll see it through. . . . Oh, John, don't it wonderful to have absolutely nothing to worry about!"

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